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ON DROPPING OUT IN CONTEMPORARY ART: AN ANALYSIS TEREZA STEJSKALOVÁ

I.

In recent years there has been a wave of interest in the radical output of half-forgotten artists such as Lee Lozano, Charlotte Posenenske and Laurie Parsons, who despite promising careers opted to quit the art scene altogether.¹ Similar motives were at work in each case: an endeavour to overcome the autonomous status of art, and a desire to intervene

1 Selected texts: Burkhard BRUNN, *Charlotte Posenenske*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz 2009; Peter ELEEY, "Lee Lozano", *frieze*, 2004, no. 85, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/lee_lozano/ (accessed 17 October 2010); Bruce HAINLEY, "On 'E'", *frieze*, 2006, no. 102, http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/on_e/ (accessed 17 October 2010); Alexander KOCH, *Kunst Verlassen. Eine Topologie*, www.kunst-verlassen.de (accessed 5 October 2010); Helen MOLESWORTH, "Tune In, Turn On, Drop Out: The Rejection of Lee Lozano", *Art Journal*, vol. 61, 2002, no. 4, pp. 65–71; Bob NICKAS, "Dematerial Girl: Whatever Happened To: Biography", *Artforum*, April 2003, pp. 202–205; Martin PESCH, "Charlotte Posenenske", *frieze*, 2000, no. 51, http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/charlotte_posenenske/ (accessed 5 October 2010); Katy SIEGEL, "Making Waves: David Reed on Legacy of Artist Lee Lozano: Interview", *Artforum*, October 2001, pp. 120–129; Katy SIEGEL, "Lee Lozano", *Artforum*, April 2008, pp. 330–332; Katarzyna CHMIELEWSKA – Mateusz KWATERKO – Kuba SZREDER – Bogna ŚWIĄTKOWSKA (eds.), *Znikanie: Instrukcja obsługi / Disappearing: A User's Manual*, Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmijana 2009.

Conferences and symposia: Krist GRUIJTHUIJSEN, "Archiving Disappearance: Symposium No. 1", Istanbul: Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, 9 April 2006; idem, "Forms of Refusal: Archiving Disappearance: The Archive", Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 16 December 2006.

Selected exhibitions: *Charlotte Posenenske*, curated by Stefan Kalmar, New York: Artists Space, 23 June – 25 July 2010; *Lee Lozano*, curated by Iris Müller-Westermann, Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 13 February – 25 April 2010; *Vides: Une rétrospective*, curated by Laurent Le Bon, John Armleder, Mathieu Copeland, Gustav Metzger, Mai-Thu Perret and Clive Phillpot, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 25 February – 23 March 2009; *Charlotte Posenenske: Prototypes for Mass Production (1965–1967)*, New York: Peter Freeman Inc., 6 November 2008 – 10 January 2009; *Win First Don't Last, Win Last Don't Care*, curated by Adam Szymczyk, Basel: Kunsthalle Basel – Eindhoven: Van Abbe Museum, 2006; "Seek the Extreme...", *Dorothy Iannone, Lee Lozano*, curated by Sabine Folie, Vienna: Kunsthalle Wien, hall 2, 7 July – 15 October 2006; *Kurze Karrieren*, curated by Susanne Neuburg, Hedwig Saxenhuber, Vienna: MUMOK Factory, 20 May – 1 August 2004; *Gestures of Disappearance*, curated by Alexander Koch, Leipzig: Galerie der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst, 22 May – 22 July 2002.

directly in social and political events. Such tendencies are not uncommon in art. However, what is remarkable in these cases is that the artists concerned felt strongly enough to turn their backs on art altogether and leave the art scene, destroying all contacts with it.²

At first glance it is not difficult to understand why these artists quit the art scene. They were frustrated by the increasingly market-driven character of art, which was barely distinguishable from the commercial sector. Whatever else one might think of their actions, one cannot help being impressed by their lack of interest in profit or career advancement and their uncompromising idealism, which led them outside the space of the gallery and museum and beyond the attention of critics and theoreticians.

In their radical critique of the institution of art, Lozano and Posenenske made reference to avant-garde projects. Their overdue induction into the canon of art (related to the exponentially rising price of their works) has elicited confusion, aversion and questions. In this text I will offer a brief description of the artists and the circumstances of their departure from the art world, as well as the individual projects attempting to reincorporate them into art history. I shall attempt to convey the particular role and significance of both within the broader context of twentieth-century art. I will then look in greater detail at what it is that accounts for the current fascination with these artists (leaving aside similar frustrations with the culture industry) and what this tells us about the atmosphere that pertains in the art world at present.

II.)

The book by Peter Bürger *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which has been subject to much discussion and no little criticism but which remains valuable, defines the avant-garde in terms we still recognise, i.e. in close

² Not that this was ever a complete break. When Lozano ran out of money, she began to contact gallerists asking to be paid for her paintings. Parsons used to provide interviews for art periodicals even after leaving the scene. However, neither artist sought recognition from the art scene and refused to be part of its events.

connection with the problematic of the autonomy of art. The word autonomy in this sense refers to a situation in which art is under no obligation to be socially useful.³

Bürger's concept of the avant-garde is based on a historical classification of art as sacred, court-based and bourgeois. In the first two epochs, art is integrated into life practice, while bourgeois art is detached from the praxis of life and represents an otherwise inaccessible sphere of freedom in which it is able "to develop all of its talents". However, this is on the condition that "this sphere is strictly detached from the praxis of life".⁴ The *l'art pour l'art* movement is the culmination of this tendency: autonomy itself becomes content, by means of which it draws attention to itself for the first time.

Bürger defines the avant-garde (i.e. Dadaism, Surrealism, Constructivism, etc.) as a movement that perceived art as autonomous for the first time and made the fact explicit. However, the movement was not interested in integrating art into an existing life praxis, but in transforming this praxis from the vantage point of artistic positions. However, one fact should not be overlooked, namely that from the very start this endeavour involved a contradiction. The avant-garde revolutionary ideology was based on the separation of art from other spheres of life. And yet the avant-garde wished to overcome this separation. In this sense the movement was destined to fail. Bürger writes:

For the (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance.⁵

This attempt on the part of the avant-garde to bring about a revolution in everyday life may have failed, but it changed the way we understand art as such. However, Bürger refuses to take later neo-avant-garde activities seriously, viewing them as simply attempts to institutionalise

³ Peter BÜRGER, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1974, pp. 31–32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

the avant-garde.⁶ This strict rejection of the neo-avant-garde is behind many of the objections raised to Bürger's text.⁷

One of the main critics of Bürger's theories, especially his rejection of the neo-avant-garde, is the American theoretician and critic Hal Foster. Foster operates within the tradition of psychoanalysis and it is on this basis that he criticises Bürger's understanding of temporality in the historical sense of cause and effect.⁸ Foster's understanding of the avant-garde project is based on two concepts: Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action); and the concept of trauma propounded by the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche. This latter theory serves to complicate the issue of temporality. It describes a process by which an event that cannot be processed by the psyche as meaningful becomes traumatic only via the experience of another, later situation.⁹ The displaced content is attainable only via a returning symptom and is basically inaccessible in its original, pure form.¹⁰ According to Foster, the avant-garde is a displaced event, the traumatic significance of which can only be grasped in the hysterical projects of the neo-Dadaists, who merely unconsciously repeated avant-garde acts and thus genuinely institutionalised them. Foster's main argument with Bürger relates to the fact that in the 1960s and 70s there is a turning point, a kind of anamnesis or working through (*durcharbeiten*) of the next neo-avant-garde wave.¹¹ Artists such as Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers reacted critically to the earlier institutionalisation of the avant-garde and questioned the established institutional framework. Foster claims that only the neo-avant-garde critically and consciously comprehends and develops the avant-garde project and cannot be separated from it. The

6 *Ibid.*, p. 80: "Pointiert formuliert: Die Neoavantgarde institutionalisiert die *Avantgarde als Kunst* und negiert damit die genuin avantgardistischen Intentionen."

7 See, for example, Benjamin BUCHLOH, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde", *October*, 1986, no. 37, pp. 41–52, or Hal FOSTER, *The Return of the Real: The Avantgarde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1996, pp. 1–35.

8 Bürger's historicism is subject to similar criticism in Benjamin BUCHLOH, "Primary Colors", p. 43.

9 Jean LAPLANCHE – Jean-Bertrand PONTALIS, "Trauma", in: *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London: Karnac 2006, p. 467.

10 See Slavoj ŽIŽEK, *Enjoy your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, New York: Routledge 2001, p. 14: "[T]here is no way to conceive [the repressed] in its purity undistorted by 'compromises' that characterize the formation of the symptoms."

11 FOSTER, *Return of the Real*, p. 29.

relationship between *avant-garde* and *neo-avant-garde* is a complex one of anticipation and reconstruction.¹²

Foster also questions Bürger's reading of the *avant-garde* in the sense of an opposition between art and life and accuses him of focusing on an *avant-garde* rhetoric more than a genuine praxis.¹³ The most progressive *avant-garde* artists (Foster cites Duchamp), along with progressive *neo-avant-garde* artists (e.g. Kaprow), do not try to combine art and life but systematically interrogate their shared boundaries. Foster is fascinated by the *avant-garde* as an investigation of the conventions of creativity, and sees the *neo-avant-garde* as continuing to pursue (critically) this project.¹⁴

As far as its radicalism is concerned, Foster views the *avant-garde* as nihilistic and anarchistic and refuses to take it seriously. He is equally dismissive of certain extreme positions adopted by artists in the sixties. He regards the statements made by Daniel Buren regarding the need to rid the art world of its rules and his "total revolution" as apocalyptic. He believes rebellion in the sense of an attempt to abolish the separation of art and life has been superseded¹⁵ and claims that it is necessary "to rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic *avant-garde* outside the symbolic order but as a fracture traced by a strategic *avant-garde* within the order."¹⁶

Though Foster's use of psychoanalytical¹⁷ concepts is central to his thesis, he is mistaken in thinking that the dream of a heroic *avant-garde* or the belief that art will radically change our everyday life has been overcome and that it disappeared at the same time as Dadaism, Surrealism and Russian Constructivism appeared on the scene. In fact, it reappeared in the revolutionary enthusiasm of the sixties and seventies in the form, for instance, of Situationism or by virtue of gestures using which artists rejected artistic autonomy and art as such. This belief is

12 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 15: "In short, Bürger takes the romantic rhetoric of the *avant-garde*, of rupture and revolution, at its own word. In so doing, he misses crucial dimensions of its practice."

14 Foster claims that Rodchenko's monochromes highlight the conventions underpinning painting on the basis of the particular properties of the medium. He does not attack the institution of art as such. Like the upside-down urinal of Duchamp's *Fountain*, he highlights the boundaries that define art within a certain space and time. See *ibid.*, p. 17.

15 He writes: "this old dream is dispelled" – see *ibid.*, p. 157.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

17 I have in mind particularly the concept "Nachträglichkeit", which allows Foster to avoid Bürger's historicism.

returning today in the form of receptive processes by virtue of which these events, as Foster might say, obtain their traumatic significance.

And so I would rather tell a different story to that of Bürger or Foster. If we accept Bürger's thesis on the crucial contradiction that first appears in the radical approaches and activities of the avant-garde, i.e. that autonomy gives rise to critical positions that, inasmuch as they serve specific political and social objectives, lead to the dissolution of that very autonomy, we may deem this contradiction as one of the key paradoxes of the role of the artist in society in the twentieth century. As I have said, the avant-garde is the first to embody this conflict and the neo-avant-garde then attempts to integrate it meaningfully into art theory and practice. However, I see a similar process being played out in the work of certain artists of the sixties and seventies, who make no attempt to process this contradiction meaningfully but reintroduce it in scandalous form onto the art scene. It becomes the main cause of their rejection of art as such, and the artists, curators and critics who are reactivating, describing and processing these events today are thus assigning them meaning. As in the case of the avant-garde of the sixties, today's reception is operating retroactively on these events and is therefore inseparable from them.

The avant-garde movements of the twenties and thirties and the artists I have mentioned from the sixties and seventies, however different their specific aims and motives, confront us with their steadfast faith in the power of art to change everyday life. In the first instance this culminates in an unsuccessful attempt to overcome autonomy, and in the second in a rejection of not only art institutions but art as such. The traumatic significance of both these positions is then manifest in the difficulties that their attempts to incorporate them into the story of art encounter, whether this involve depoliticised reception (Russian Constructivism and Surrealism),¹⁸ the confusion provoked by their inclusion in artistic

¹⁸ Yve-Alain BOIS criticises the depoliticisation of the Russian Constructivists in the first wave of their reception in America, see "Russian Revolution: Yve-Alain Bois on the Politics of Constructivism", *Artforum*, February 2006, pp. 53–56. Regarding the notorious reluctance of academics to speak of the ambiguity surrounding the engagement of the Surrealists, see Raymond SPITERI – Donald LACOSS, "Introduction: Revolution by Night: Surrealism, Politics and Culture", in: *eidem* (eds.), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2003, p. 13: "Indeed, the compass of the Surrealist enterprise has been sorely truncated in most academic accounts of the movement, which attempt to reduce Surrealism to an artistic or literary movement – more often than not, at the expense of Surrealism's politics."

institutions and specialist journals (Dadaism, Situationism),¹⁹ or the increasing prices demanded for their works on the art market resulting from their canonisation (e.g. Lee Lozano).²⁰

III.)

Before we get onto individual exhibitions and texts that illustrate this fascination, let us say a few words about an artist who is omnipresent in these projects. The artist is Lee Lozano (1933–1999), and her output testifies to the search for the good life through art and culminates in artistic actions that explicitly deal with and announce her subsequent departure from the art scene, and by implication the impossibility of finding a meaningful life through art.

Lozano was a linchpin of the New York art scene at the end of the sixties and into the seventies, a scene dominated by men. She was friends with Andy Warhol, part of the circle around Lucy Lippard, and hung out with figures like Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Vito Acconci, etc. She had regular exhibitions, often in the Green Gallery in New York, and in 1970 she had a solo exhibition in the prestigious Whitney Museum of American Art. Her work ranges from garish, aggressive, sexually explicit, expressive and surrealist drawings, via minimalist “wave” paintings, to what she called “language pieces”, performances that she herself was reluctant to call by that name. Language pieces involved tasks that she set herself, in the form of journal entries, and then carried out and recorded. The tasks usually related to interpersonal relations. For instance, she decided to boycott women for an entire month in order to “improve communication”

¹⁹ For more details regarding the problematic, controversial reception of Dadaism, see Jeffrey A. HALLEY, “The Sociology of Reception: The Alienation and Recovery of Dada”, in: Lidija HEREK – Dimitrij RUPEL (eds.), *Alienation and Participation in Culture*, Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana Press 1986, pp. 303–317. For more about the criticism provoked by the first large exhibition of the situationists entitled *The Passage of a Few People Through a Brief Period of Time* (1989–1990), which took place at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, see Peter SMITH, “On the Passage of a Few People: Situationist Nostalgia”, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 14, 1991, no. 1, pp. 118–125.

²⁰ E.g. SIEGEL, “Lee Lozano”.

and ended up basically continuing in this way to the end of her life.²¹ She called her diary entries “drawings” and exhibited them. In *Grass Piece* she smoked marihuana non-stop for six weeks and wrote down her feelings and impressions. In *Paranoia Piece* she set herself the task of describing her work to an unsuccessful artist and then waiting to see whether they would “misappropriate” one of her ideas. In *Throw Up Piece* she threw the most recent ten issues of the magazine *Artforum* in the air and let them fall where they might. These last two actions in particular were illustrative of her growing disappointment with the art scene. The entry dated 8 February 1969 makes this withdrawal explicit. It reads:

Gradually but determinedly avoid being present at official or public ‘uptown’ functions or gatherings related to the ‘art world’ in order to pursue investigation of *total personal & public revolution*. Exhibit in public only pieces which further sharing of ideas and information related to *total personal & public revolution*.²²

In the same entry we discover information about her last visit to an exhibition. Other entries make reference to institutional criticism:

For me there can be no art revolution that is separate from a science revolution, a political revolution, an education revolution, a drug revolution, a sex revolution or a personal revolution. I cannot consider a program of museum reforms without equal attention to gallery reforms and art magazine reforms which would aim to eliminate stables of artists and writers. I will not call myself an art worker but an art dreamer and I will participate only in a total revolution simultaneously personal and public.²³

21 Exactly why Lozano took this decision and how it was intended to “improve communication” is not clear. Helen Molesworth suggests it was a feminist gesture in that Lozano named this performance *Boycott*. Molesworth points out that the term boycott was being used by the civil rights movement and implied a resistance to discrimination. However, she also admits that things remain hazy: “Did she want to boycott women as a way of rejecting a socially constructed category, a subject position, a behavioral mandate, a predefined societal role, a presumed sexuality? I don’t know.” See MOLESWORTH, “Tune In”, p. 70.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

23 Alexander KOCH, “Why Would You Give Up Art in Postwar Eastern Europe (and How Would We Know)? Adding New Blind Spots to the East Art Map”, in: Marina GRŽINIĆ – Günther HEEG – Veronika DARIAN (eds.), *Mind the Map! History Is Not Given: A Documentation of the Symposium*, <http://www.kunst-verlassen.de/kv5/KV5.pdf>, (accessed 5 October 2010).

The culmination of her criticism of art institutions and gradual withdrawal from the art scene is the simple fact that one day she left her apartment and studio in New York. She called this *Dropout Piece*.²⁴ Sometime later she moved to Dallas, where she remained until her death in 1999. For the last twenty years of her life she cut off almost all contact with the New York scene.

For more than thirty years after leaving the New York scene, Lozano was forgotten about. And then in 2004, Bob Nickas, an expert on this period, resuscitated her by curating with Alanna Heiss a solo exhibition of her works at the PS1 Gallery in New York entitled *Lee Lozano, Drawn from Life: 1961–1971*.²⁵ This was immediately followed by the travelling exhibition curated by Adam Szymczyk (Kunsthalle Basel, Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven) entitled *Win First Don't Last, Win Last Don't Care*.²⁶ Since then both her personality and her work have found a place in the artistic canon of the twentieth century, a fact closely related to the rapidly increasing prices demanded and paid for her work. This fact did not go unobserved.²⁷

²⁴ In a diary entry dated 5. 4. 1970 she writes: "It was inevitable, since I work in sets of course, that I do the *Dropout* (note the pun) *Piece*. It has been churning for a long time but I think it's abt [sic] to blow. *Dropout Piece* is the *hardest work* I have ever done [in] that it involves destruction of (or at least complete understanding of) *powerful* emotional habits. I want to get over my habit of emotional dependence on love. I want to start trusting myself & others more. I want to believe that I have power & complete my own fate." Adam SZYMCZYK (ed.), *Lee Lozano: Win First Don't Last, Win Last Don't Care* (exh. cat.), Basel: Kunsthalle Basel – Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum 2006, pp. 17–18.

²⁵ *Lee Lozano, Drawn from Life: 1961–1971*, curated by Alanna Heiss and Bob Nickas, New York: P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, 22 January – 6 September 2004.

²⁶ *Win First Don't Last, Win Last Don't Care*, curated by Adam Szymczyk, Basel: Kunsthalle Basel – Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum 2006.

²⁷ Koch is critical of the rising prices paid for the paintings and drawings of Lee Lozano and claims that this fact jars with the utopian trajectory of her work. See Alexander KOCH, "Stepped Out, Pulled In: What Results from Creating the Visibility of Disappearance?", "Archiving Disappearance Symposium", Istanbul: Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center 2006, http://www.kunst-verlassen.de/kv6/kv6_01.html (accessed 5 October 2010). Even though Katy Siegel regards the rediscovery of Lee Lozano as well deserved, in the artist's success she sees mainly signs of the close links between the art market and the art canon. The popularity of the canon derives from the dynamic of the art market, and the cause for this Siegel paradoxically locates in the radical opinions of the artist that are attractive to the market. Another reason for Lozano's renewed popularity according to Siegel is that the "rediscovery" of an artist is more advantageous and a more secure investment to the market than the discovery of a rookie artist. SIEGEL, "Lee Lozano".

IV.

This renewed interest in a half forgotten artist initiated a wave of exhibitions and curatorial and theoretical projects examining the theme of withdrawal from the art scene or the rejection of art altogether. The main event was the large exhibition curated by Susanne Neuburg and Hedwig Saxenhuber *Kurze Karrieren (Short Careers)* in 2004 at mumok, Vienna.²⁸ The exhibition introduced artists active in the turbulent sixties and seventies, a period during which cultural and social upheavals inevitably impacted on the art scene. Many artists grew impatient with the role they were being forced to play and gave up successful careers in the arts. Lee Lozano was one of these, as was the German minimalist and Conceptual artist Charlotte Posenenske, whose work was influenced by Russian constructivism and the Dutch movement De Stijl. Posenenske differs from American minimalists by virtue of her radical politics. Posenenske's works serve as models of industrially manufactured objects intended for sale for low prices that are used for purposes that their owners deem appropriate. She thus expresses her opposition to art as luxury to be owned only by the 1%. She actually published a manifesto, in which she writes:

Although art's formal development has progressed at an increasing tempo, its social function has withered. Art is a commodity that is only temporarily contemporary, yet the market is minute, and prestige and prices rise the less current the supply is. I find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that art can contribute nothing to the solution of pressing social problems.²⁹

Posenenske went on to become a sociologist.³⁰

²⁸ *Kurze Karrieren*, curated by Susanne Neuburg and Hedwig Saxenhuber, Vienna: MUMOK Factory, 20 May – 1 August 2004.

²⁹ "Obwohl die formale Entwicklung der Kunst in immer schnellerem Tempo weitergegangen ist, ist ihre gesellschaftliche Funktion verkümmert./Kunst ist eine Ware von vorübergehender Aktualität, aber der Markt ist winzig und Ansehen und Preise steigen, je weniger aktuell das Angebot ist./Es fällt mir schwer, mich damit abzufinden, daß Kunst nichts zur Lösung drängender gesellschaftlicher Probleme beitragen kann." Charlotte POSENENSKE, "Manifesto", *Art International*, 1968, no. 5, p. 50.

³⁰ PESCH, "Charlotte Posenenske".

As well as Verena Pfisterer, Konrad Lueg, Goran Trbuljak, OHO, Hilka Nordhausen, Stephen Kaltenbach and Christine Kozlov, the exhibition featured the work of three Czech performers, Petr Štembera, Karel Miler and Jan Mlčoch.³¹

In 2005, Krist Gruijthuisen, the Dutch artist and curator, began work on a project with no time constraints entitled *Archiving Disappearance: The Archive*. The idea was to chart the lives of artists who simply discontinued their creative activities. These included Lee Lozano, Tehching Hsieh and Anna Winteler. The last of these was an artist attempting to find the most immediate form of communication with other people, who left art in order to become a physiotherapist. Laurie Parsons, an artist active during the eighties, was another – after a dealer had bought a piece she had on show, she simply refused to sell any more of her work. One of her best known projects saw her squat in a gallery for the duration of one of her solo exhibitions, which every day she left in order to work with mentally handicapped people.³² At the start of the nineties,

31 I believe a comparison of these three Czech performers with the other drop-outs is problematic, not least because the background against which they worked was different. They were faced with direct political repression. Nevertheless, I see a certain analogy in the expectations that these ex-artists incorporate into their art, and their disappointment when confronted by the inability of art to put right the wrongs of society. For instance, in an interview with the art group Ládví, Jan Mlčoch says: "I'm not really interested in that pure art. Today I hold setting up a school or establishing a retirement home in higher esteem than some artistic gesture. I regard such things as far more consequential than any piece of art." See more: *The Shift from the Personal to the Social: Conversation Between the Ládví Group and Jan Mlčoch, The Sešit Reader, The First Ten Years of the Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones 2007–2019*, VVP AVU, Prague 2019, p. 37.

However, the activities of this group of performers from the seventies have in recent years become the focus of interest of the local art scene and provoked many performative reactions. The largest project is undoubtedly *Replaced* by Barbora Klímová, which dates back to 2006 and was awarded the Jindřich Chalupský Prize in the same year. Klímová met up with former performers, interviewed them (with the exception of Petr Štembera, who withheld cooperation on the project), and reprised several of their performances from the seventies. In 2007, Ládví conducted the interview referred to with Jan Mlčoch, and two years previously the Rafani group had faithfully replicated *Bianco*, an action by Jan Mlčoch from 1977. During this performance the artist lay on the ground and was spat on in the face for thirty minutes. He then sat at a table and began to write his signature very slowly, something he did not complete. It is clear that these actions did not focus directly on the withdrawal of performers from art. Klímová's work transformed public space through her intervention. The Ládví group was interested in the socio-ethical aspects of Mlčoch's projects, and Rafani, according to Václav Magid, were interested in the act of spitting and the ironic shift from solitary existential performance to routine group activity. The theme of withdrawal from art only appears here and there in Klímová's interview.

32 This project was recently part of a large retrospective entitled *Vides: Une rétrospective*, curated by Laurent Le Bon, John Armleder, Mathieu Copeland, Gustav Metzger, Mai-Thu Perret and Clive Phillpot, Paris: Centre Pompidou 25 February – 23 March 2009.

Parsons quit the art world, saying that “[A]rt must spread into other realms, into spirituality and social giving”.³³

Two years later, Gruijthuijsen organised two symposia as part of his project, the first at Platform Garanti, Istanbul, and the second at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. The latter symposium was part of the conference “Forms of Refusal”,³⁴ held on the occasion of one of Szymczyk’s retrospectives of Lee Lozano in Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.³⁵

In 2002, Alexander Koch, an art theorist and curator, organised the exhibition *Gestures of Disappearance* at the gallery of the Art Academy in Leipzig.³⁶ The exhibition charted those works or actions of Bas Jan Ader, Chris Burden, Arthur Cravan and Lee Lozano that dramatised or genuinely played out the disappearance of the artist. From 2002 to 2006, Koch was involved in *Kunst Verlassen* (Exit Art), in which he attempted to process the phenomenon of withdrawal from the art scene, about which he has written a number of texts.³⁷

33 NICKAS, “Dematerial Girl”, p. 205.

34 “Forms of Refusal: Archiving Disappearance: The Archive”, Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 16 December 2006.

35 See footnote 26.

36 *Gestures of Disappearance*, curated by Alexander Koch, Leipzig: Galerie der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst, 22 May – 22 June 2002.

37 These are available at www.kunst-verlassen.de (accessed 5 October 2010). An attractive feature of Koch’s work is the way he so obviously attempts to avoid any excessive romanticisation and glorification of the ex-artist. Above all he draws our attention to the grey areas of art history and its discourse. The history of “departures from art” does not exist, and there is no discourse in art theory that might outline the importance and situation of an artist who turns their back on creative activities. And so in *Kunst Verlassen*, Koch introduces a new term: *Kunstausstieg/Kunstaussteiger* (exit art/she who exits art), which he defines thus: “Mit Kunstaussteiger meinen wir einen für uns zu einem Zeitpunkt X im Kunstfeld verortbaren Akteur, der zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt Y nicht mehr im Kunstfeld (ver)ortbar war und der dies so wollte.” (“The term *Kunstaussteiger* refers to someone who at time X was visible on the art scene and later at time Y voluntarily ceased being visible.”) A crucial aspect of the concept of the *Kunstaussteiger* is the term “art field”, which refers to the social, institutional, economic and discursive framework within which art is practiced and its concepts produced. The concept of a field of art and above all visibility within this field allows Koch to exclude the huge number of art students who have not yet begun to operate as artists. It also disqualifies those who were discouraged by failure and gave up art, i.e. all of those who were unable to assert their presence and visibility within the field of art (at galleries, newspapers, magazines, etc.). It also excludes the entire group of artists who attempted to criticise art by redefining the concept of the artist and indeed art (Kaprow), and who nevertheless remain visible actors in the field. Finally, the voluntary nature of this departure excludes those who are prevented from pursuing their creative activities through violence. See Alexander KOCH, “Wovon wir sprechen (können), wenn wir vom Ausstieg aus der Kunst sprechen”, *Kunst Verlassen: Eine Topologie*, http://www.kunst-verlassen.de/kv4/kv4_02dt.html (accessed 5 October 2010).

In 2009, projects addressing similar themes but employing different methods were held in Poland. They were no longer so focused on specific artists, their archives and exhibitions, but on their departure from the art scene, which they interpreted as a metaphor that they then further elaborated.

The first such project was *Poszliśmy do Croatan (Gone to Croatan)* at the Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Znaki Czasu in Toruń.³⁸ The title refers to the first English colonists who mysteriously disappeared. The exhibition concept also works with the figure of the *idiótés*, the ancient Greek word for an individual who separates themselves off from the life of their community. From the perspective of members of the community, the *idiótés* inevitably becomes a phantom that, like the ghost of Hamlet's father as the curators put it, indirectly or fundamentally influences events in the community they have left. The artists invited to exhibit dramatised the power of this disappearance in different ways whilst themselves becoming part of it.

Another project was *Znikanie: Instrukcja obsługi (Disappearing: A User's Manual)*,³⁹ a glossary of terms that developed the theme of disappearance in art, literature, philosophy and politics. The result was that Melville's scrivener Bartleby rubs shoulders with Lee Lozano, as well as with Georges Perec's famous novel that lacks the letter "e" (*La Disparition*) and the Philadelphia Experiment during which the US Navy was claimed to have been rendered invisible by the utilisation of Einstein's unified field theory.

What do these projects have in common? Apart from the Vienna exhibition, all of them directly or indirectly illustrate a disillusionment with the way the art scene operates, the commercialisation of art, and the operations of artistic institutions. Alexander Koch and both Polish projects also reference avant-garde and neo-avant-garde tendencies, while all of these projects feature a fascination with the political and ethical motives of those who drop out of the art scene. Finally, the initiators of all of these projects are without exception important and successful institutional agents who track from a distance the trajectories of

³⁸ *Poszliśmy do Croatan*, curated by Robert Rumas and Daniel Muzyczuk, Toruń: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Znaki Czasu, 20 June – 27 September 2009.

³⁹ CHMIELEWSKA et al. (eds.), *Znikanie*.

the objects of their interest. In the text he wrote for the symposium in Istanbul, Alexander Koch first described the disgust he felt as a young person for the culture industry and just how helpless art itself is in the face of it. And then he declared:

If that sounds niggling to you: I agree. Criticising the art world like this appears cheap. But feelings are true and they can in fact cause unease and dissatisfaction that lead people to leave a system, that appears paralysed to them. What I did with this feeling, still in that year 2002, was not dropping out of art to study political science or so, nor fall into agony, but – accomplishing my role as an artist, curator, researcher – to schedule an exhibition. A show that would try to talk about what that is: turning around and going away, if you are an artist.⁴⁰

The reply given by Krist Gruijthuijsen to the question put to him by the Canadian magazine *C: International Contemporary Art* as to whether he believed it was possible to exist as an artist outside the art scene is exemplary in this respect:

I think it's more fruitful to try to change structures from within. Nevertheless, I'm fascinated by the decision to resign from one's practice and position as a possibility, to distance oneself for a more critical examination.⁴¹

V.

Posenenske, Lozano and Parsons all remind us of the huge expectations invested in art that can so easily end up in disappointment and disillusion. The lesson to be gleaned from what they say might be parsed as

⁴⁰ KOCH, "Stepped Out".

⁴¹ Johan LUNDH, "The Art of Disappearing. Can Artmaking Only Have Meaning within the Context of the Art World? Johan Lundh in Conversation with Krist Gruijthuijsen about the Archiving Disappearance Project", *C: International Contemporary Art*, 2009, no. 101, p. 33.

follows: if art cannot be a tool for revolution (Lozano), a therapy curing social problems (Posenenske), and if it is isolated from other spheres (Parsons), then it is meaningless and must be abandoned. What motivates returns to these gestures is bound up with the frustration felt at the commercialisation of art but also with the seductiveness of the idealistic faith that fascinates curators such as Koch or Gruijthuijsen. These remain critical of the way the culture industry operates but maintain a cautious distance from the idealism of artists.

This ambiguous approach is dealt with by the French psychoanalyst and ethnographer Octavo Mannoni in his essay "I Know Well, but All the Same",⁴² in which he considers the mechanism of faith⁴³ through the prism of Freud's theory of *Verleugnung* or denial. For Mannoni this is key to explaining the somewhat banal and ubiquitous mentality that allows faith to survive despite being disproved by experience, but in a modified form. Mannoni expresses this in the locution "I know, but still". Even though we come up against a fact that contradicts our faith, our faith remains, albeit somewhat transformed by our confrontation with reality. The example given is of one of Freud's patients who had consulted an astrologer. The astrologer told the patient his brother-in-law would die of crayfish or oyster poisoning in July or August. July and August came and went and the patient said to Freud: "I realise my brother-in-law didn't die, but even so, the prophecy was amazing." Mannoni claims that something of faith lingered here in the feeling of absurd pleasure clear in the patient's words.⁴⁴

Let us return to what Gruijthuijsen had to say:

I think it's more fruitful to try to change structures from within. Nevertheless, I'm fascinated by the decision to resign from one's practice and position as a possibility, to distance oneself for a more critical examination.

⁴² Octave MANNONI, "I Know Well, but All the Same...", in: Molly Anne ROTHENBERG – Denis FOSTER – Slavoj ŽIŽEK (eds.), *Perversion and the Social Relation*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2003, pp. 68–92.

⁴³ Mannoni does not mean faith in the sense of an "unconditional commitment", as it is seen in Judaism for instance. However, both types of faith can exist side by side, and so Old Testament Jews believed in the existence of Ba'al but were not beholden to him and in fact waged war upon him. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

At first sight this sentiment is identical with Foster's declaration regarding the strategic avant-garde and can be translated into Mannoni's model: *I know that rejecting art institutions and their autonomy in order to mount a direct intervention in the state of things leads nowhere, but even so it's fascinating.* We can view Koch's approach in a similar light. He first cites his earlier feelings of disgust at the culture industry and the helplessness of the artist, and then acknowledges his criticism is petty (*I agree*) and transforms his earlier radicalism before our very eyes into the basically harmless passion of a historian for a methodologically problematic object (*nevertheless*).

Like Freud's patient, who no longer believes in the astrologist's prediction after it remains unfulfilled, Gruijthuijsen and Koch, perhaps as a consequence of the failure of the avant-garde or a rejection of the art of our artists, no longer share their expectations openly. However, these expectations persist in a different form as a strange preoccupation with artists who prioritise such expectations over their careers as artists.

As we have seen, Mannoni's story of the faith that survives its refutation by facts has its origin in Freud's theory of fetishistic denial.⁴⁵ Freud's reasoning is based on the situation of a little boy who believes that women have a penis just like men. When the boy discovers that this is not the case, i.e. when his faith is confronted with the incontestable fact of sexual difference, he falls prey to the castration anxiety: "If she does not have one, then I too could lose mine". The fetishistic solution to this situation is the creation of a substitute (on the basis of similarity) from another part of the body or some other object altogether that becomes the object of the little boy's sexual interest. In other words, orthodox fetishistic denial resides in the fact that faith acquires the form of an object to which we devote extraordinary attention. Its presence allows us to cope relatively painlessly with what would otherwise be an unpleasant confrontation with reality. The second part of the sentence – *I am well aware, but even so* – is inscribed with the form of a fetish. And so on the one hand the fetish allows for a palliative distance from an unpleasant reality (by virtue of which we can continue to believe that things are not quite as they

⁴⁵ Sigmund FREUD, "Fetišismus", in: *Spisy z let 1925–1931. Sebrané spisy*, sv. 14, Praha: Psychoanalytické nakladatelství 2007, pp. 245–250.

seem), while on the other it encourages a safe distance from the faith that rejects reality and in a certain sense allows us to save face.

A fascination with radical artists and their rejection of art is only a kind of deformation of the desire for radical change in society through art that is for many artists and theoreticians becoming more and more absurd but difficult to relinquish. The figure of the ex-artist as a fetish is one way this desire survives in acceptable form, while guaranteeing a certain palliative distance from the traumatic failure of radical artists and the often commercial nature of the culture industry of which these curators and artists are a part.

VI.)

By returning artists to the fold who had dropped out of the art scene because their faith in the omnipotence of art remained unconsummated, in a certain sense curators annul these artists' decision. These ex-artists find themselves in wraithlike form back in the field of art, and with them, like a phantom, comes that which was shown to be impossible in art and therefore had to be accomplished outside it. However, the autonomy of the field of art has been preserved. In this fantasy, the mutual exclusivity of the autonomy of art and the desire to intervene directly in the course of events via artistic activities temporarily ceases to play a disruptive role.

The most trenchant advocate of this idea is the American critic and theoretician Stephen Wright, who openly criticises the impotence of art that derives from its autonomy and writes of the outflow of artists from the art scene as a reaction to its commercialisation and character as spectacle. However, Wright attempts to reintegrate these ex-artists into artistic institutions by insisting in his texts that they are genuine artists precisely by virtue of the fact that they surrendered their artistic autonomy, i.e. the artist becomes an artist by not being an artist.

Wright describes a practice that at first sight does not seem to be art but that is contingent upon a knowledge of the artistic context. This activity avoids exhibitions, does not culminate in an exhibitable product

and there is no artist involved. It exists without creator, viewer (in the sense of someone who simply gazes in rapt attention) or identifiable object and is therefore invisible as art. According to Wright, such “art” contains within it a truly subversive potential because nobody sees it as art, and so while it has certain procedures in common with contemporary art, it is by no means innocuous since it intervenes in reality. He cites as an example the Argentinean Grupo de Arte Callejero, which produces posters, brands and maps reminding people of the crimes of the former military junta, on which they identify the homes of former torturers and murders and the places they carried out their mass executions.**46**

However, Wright’s position is unsustainable. The study of these “non-works” in an art journal is ethically problematic, since it provides visibility in the art field to someone who has opted out of it and is attempting (if we are to take Wright at his word) to remain invisible. Alexander Koch encountered a similar problem.**47** Furthermore, Wright’s act is essentially performative: by writing of such works for an art journal he denies his own claims and describes a creator, identifies their “work”, etc. He attempts to interrogate the autonomy of arts institutions in such a way that he reintroduces to their segregated sphere of operations those who have left them in order to judge their works by aesthetic criteria so that they acquire a visibility in the field of art and thus a certain value on the art market.**48**

46 Stephen WRIGHT, “Behind Police Lines: Art Visible and Invisible”, *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol. 2, 2008, no. 1, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/pdfs/wright.pdf> (accessed 5 October 2010).

47 The hesitation at the core of Koch’s project is related to the fact that his concept of *Kunstausstieg* is based on the intention of the person dropping out of art. At the same time, Koch fails to respect this intention and returns visibility to someone who had explicitly rejected it. Koch criticises the exponentially increasing prices of the paintings and drawings of Lee Lozano. And yet this is the outcome of her heightened profile in the field that he is a part of. On the one hand, Koch challenges art historians and theoreticians to take notice of these marginal cases that, he claims, allow us to grasp the operations of art institutions or the role of the artist, while at the same time he seeks to protect those who rejected the field of art from being swallowed up by the system. He mentions the difficulty involved in documenting such departures from art, and even though he speaks of the phenomenon, he holds back from discussing other examples. He ends up speaking only of two artists (Lozano and Posenenske), because he claims they are already so well known by the art-loving public that there would be no point in not speaking about them. KOCH, “Wovon wir sprechen” and “Stepped Out”.

48 He is accused of precisely this by Jacques Rancière. See Jacques RANCIÈRE – Stephen WRIGHT – Jonathan DRONSFIELD, “An Exchange with Jacques Rancière”, *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol. 2, 2008, no. 1, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/jrexchange.html> (accessed 5 October 2010).

The current Rancière-inspired doxa is based on the autonomy of the aesthetic experience. It perceives political significance in the tension between this autonomy and heteronomy (i.e. any aspect of life can become art), the mutual effects of which shift the boundaries between what can and cannot be perceived, heard and seen. According to Rancière, the critical potential of art is not a consequence of specific artistic procedures.⁴⁹ Like that another famous defender of aesthetic autonomy, Theodor Adorno, Rancière intuitively sees in art only a utopian promise. Wright is correct in thinking that it is difficult to appreciate the subversive power of the aesthetic experience in the midst of the well established industry that is contemporary art.

The avant-garde and the artists I have examined show that art gives rise to radical ideas and emotions and conserves them, without being able to offer them a specific political or social objective. These days art is caught in a tension between an awareness of this contradiction and the ethical unacceptability of the organisation to which it is subordinate and which intervenes in and influences directly its operations. It is precisely such stresses and strains that see the creation of projects that attempt to resolve this situation by fetishistic means, i.e. by an unacknowledged escape into the realm of avant-garde wish fulfilment. Such projects thus become a hidden indicator of the critical nature of this tension.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ "I never thought art as such was subversive. For the first reason that I don't know what art as such means. I always think that art is perceived in specific configurations, specific regimes of identification, that allow for certain social functions or certain political possibilities, etc. So what I stressed yesterday too is that precisely the possible subversive effect is the effect of aesthetic experience and not the effect of artistic strategies. Which does not mean that precisely art is not subversive, art can contribute to produce new changes in the configuration of the sensible, in the cartography of the visible and the sensible, but it cannot anticipate and calculate its own effect." *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Pavel Sterec, Jakub Stejskal, Václav Magid and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive criticism.