

KUNST VERLASSEN 5

Why Would You Give Up Art in Postwar Eastern Europe (and How Would We Know)? – Adding New Blind Spots to the *East Art Map*

As I know little about the arts in the eastern part of Europe, my contribution to this symposium, and the subsequent publication, won't be of any help in completing the *East Art Map* – rather the opposite. For those who have entrusted themselves with the task of drawing this map, I wish to raise what might be considered a methodological and, at the same time, political question in that ongoing process, namely, what would it mean for the mapping, or remapping, of the history of art in Eastern Europe, if one were to postulate the possible existence of a recurrent protagonist in that field, one who must necessarily, if unintentionally, be excluded from the mapping process solely for the reason that he cannot be seen, since the quality of being excluded is his only defining feature.

If this sounds peculiar, let me first introduce you to the Western version of just such a protagonist. And then let us consider whether we might find him mirrored in the East.

For some time now, my work has been circling the question: What if, as an artist, you decide to give up your artistic practice, disappear from the art scene, and leave the field of art altogether? Does this simply mean you have given up, that you have failed? Or would you merely be switching to a new line of work, changing your job? Or could there be, potentially, more to it than this? Could leaving art be, perhaps, a gesture of critique and (artistic) sovereignty?

It will, indeed, come as no surprise if we say that today there are far more former artists in the Western world, than there are practicing artists. Given the large number of artists who graduate from our academies and the very few who eventually succeed in a professional career, the »ex-artist« is a very common phenomenon in our social environment – mind you, without being a particularly seductive subject for art critics or art historians.

But then there is something different: What if you choose to stop your practice, *even though you are successful*, even though making a career is *not* a problem, even though you have a stable position in the field? If you intentionally give up this position, without being forced to do so by any external condition like economic pressures or political repression, then knowing why and knowing *how* you do this, becomes a challenging topic for reflexive considerations concerning the art field.

So let's proceed.

In fact, there are a number of cases of artists in the West deliberately dropping out of the game. Especially if you look at certain historical periods when the art field was transforming itself, becoming politicized, with artistic roles changing and evolving, there is a good chance you will discover certain actors in the field who took their curiosity, their skepticism, or their critique to the point where it led them to drastic conclusions, one of which was the option of going so far into their critical stance, tremendous ambition, or awareness of art's limited social or political impact, that they did not come back to art. The late sixties and early seventies of the past century were such a moment in history. Two significant artists of the period can help us in our investigation of this phenomenon of »dropping out«.

Charlotte Posenenske was a German artist engaged in a social understanding of artistic practice. Her body of work, characterized by participatory features and made up of objects intended to include and engage the spectator, sought to open minimalism up to an interactive notion of sculptural space. But despite having the beginnings of a successful career, in May 1968, Posenenske published a statement in *Art International* magazine, in which she declared: »It is painful for me to face the fact that art cannot contribute to the solution of urgent social

problems.«¹ Of course, this limitation of art included her own art as well. In the autumn of the same year, her artistic practice came to an end. Posenenske continued her research and intellectual engagement by studying and then practicing sociology.²

A second example is the American artist Lee Lozano. During the 1960s, Lozano was an active painter in New York, evolving from an expressive style to an abstract minimalist vocabulary. In 1968, while developing her last and strongly programmatic series of paintings, the *Wave Series*, she started to write her so-called *Language Pieces*, which, in retrospect, established her as a representative of early New York conceptualism. In these language pieces, Lozano sets herself very precise instructions about including specific procedures in her daily routine. These instructions revolve around a critical reflection of the diverse conditions of her role, her existence as an artist. Economic, institutional, sexual, and psychological concerns become the subject of the language pieces and thus of Lozano's daily actions. Cumulatively, these actions represent a performative scenario of withdrawal.

Let us consider two examples. The *WITHDRAWAL PIECE*, dated 8 February 1969, states:

»Pull out of a show at Dick Bellamy's to avoid hanging with work that brings you down.«³

(Bellamy was Lozano's gallerist at that time.) Consequently, she withdrew one of her paintings from a group show. More programmatic is the *GENERAL STRIKE PIECE*, also from February 1969:

»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 and public revolution.«⁴

But why does she pull herself out of the game like this?

In a statement published in April 1969, she writes: »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.«⁵ Her private notes indicate that, very much like Posenenske, Lozano was disheartened by the realization that such a revolution was not happening and probably never would happen. For her, withdrawal from the art world represented an extreme form of criticizing its conditions, one that was both public and private; she was frustrated by its inability to engage in life and transform life. This was, as we know, a common feeling in Western avant-garde movements at the time.

Lozano's conclusion was the *DROP OUT PIECE*, which is *and is not* a »piece.« It is simply the fact that in 1972, Lee Lozano closed her studio, broke off connections with friends and colleagues (all, it seems, except Dan Graham), and left New York. Over the next thirty years she never revived any artistic practice, had very little contact with art people, and right up to her death in the late 1990s, was almost forgotten. (As a side note, a stock of Lozano's paintings from the 1960s managed to survive somewhere in the vicinity of New York, and just a few years ago, some of her language pieces began circulating in the art world again. After a few initial revival exhibitions, in the summer of 2004, the PS1 Contemporary Art Center in New York dedicated a small retrospective show to her, and a few months later the art dealers Hauser & Wirth Zurich London, took over the Estate of Lee Lozano.⁶ From this perspective, we might have to say that Lozano's attempted dropping-out has been reversed.)

What is important here is that these two cases introduce us to the actual existence of the figure I call the *Kunstaussteiger* – the »art dropout« – who deliberately drops out from art by actively leaving the art field.

¹ Charlotte Posenenske, »Statement«, *Art International* 12, no. 5 (May 1968).

² For example, she co-authored, with Burkhard Brunn, a study on work evaluation, *Vorgabezeit und Arbeitswert: Interessenskritik an der Methodenkonstruktion; Leistungsgradschätzungen, Systeme vorbestimmter Zeiten, analytische Arbeitsbewertung* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag, 1979).

³ Lee Lozano, *Withdrawal Piece*, 8 February 1969, The Estate of Lee Lozano and Hauser & Wirth Zurich London.

⁴ Lee Lozano, *General Strike Piece*, 8 February 1969, The Estate of Lee Lozano and Hauser & Wirth Zurich London.

⁵ Lee Lozano, »Statement for Open Public Hearing, Art Workers Coalition« (10 April 1969), in *Open Hearing* (New York: Art Workers Coalition, 1969).

⁶ Beginning in 1992, Barry Rosen and Jaap van Liere, based in New York, sought to revive Lozano's work by representing her and supporting research activity about her work. They managed the Estate of Lee Lozano after her death in 1999 until Hauser & Wirth took over the management in 2004.

But this means: it is a practice. Lozano withdrew, step by step, from the art field's economic, institutional, social, and psychological parameters, as well as its urban settings, which determined her role, her articulation, and her physical and mental existence as an artist. As it happens, this process was articulated and documented in the language pieces, as these were part of and, at the same time, the trace of the dropping-out process.

But dropping out, as I describe it here, is not only a *practice* in the art field – that is to say, an *artistic practice*, albeit of a very particular sort – it is also a statement, an artistic articulation. Lozano and Posenenske exclude themselves from the field of artistic practice *and discourse*, and both state publicly why they are doing so. In the way Lozano directly links her artistic articulation to her pragmatic actions, we can even consider her dropping out as a *performative* action: she pulls out by saying that this is what she is doing and by doing what she says she is doing. Both Lozano and Posenenske leave no doubt about their motivation and both position their statement as a political one, as a critique.

So now taking all of this together, can we go so far as to say that the *Kunstausstieg*, the dropping out of art, is, or can be, a critical practice in the cultural field? I tend to think so. I propose viewing it as a critical practice that takes the art field and related conditions as both its subject matter and field of action. But wouldn't this mean we are here dealing with a radicalized form of institutional critique? Let me leave this as an open question.

In the mid-nineteenth century, at the beginning of the twentieth century, at the end of the 1960s, and in the mid-1990s, there seems to be a cultural–political pull that creates a dynamic in which dropping out of art seems to occur with greater frequency than at other times. Without going into too much depth here, I would propose the hypothesis that there exists an invisible and unwritten history of the phenomenon of dropping out of art – *eine Geschichte des Kunstausstiegers*⁷.

In modern times and until recently, this history necessarily remained unwritten. Modern art and its avant-garde discourse were based on a system of distinctions in which the Outside, or the Other, provided the necessary opposite for constructing the identity of art and the artist. From the constitutive logic of modern art, its outside could only be conceived either as something for it to appropriate – which is what the avant-garde movements did – or as its negativity, in other words, a dialectical relationship. Crossing the border to the outside represented the utopian vanishing point for the avant-garde process, but it was impossible to imagine the artist actually arriving there – this was equivalent to his disappearance. Modernity had no terms, no concepts, for such a very pragmatic exercise external to its logic and institutionalized operations.

So it seems, in fact, that critics and, in particular, art historians were simply unable to view dropping out as anything other than a sign of the failed career of a person who once produced art and – to put it in practical terms – as a halt in the production of actual artworks for them to write about. So until very recently, there was simply nothing written about the withdrawal from art of people like Posenenske and Lozano. And since you cannot collect *DROP OUT PIECES* or put them in a show or rank them alongside other artistic creations, they simply do not exist on the map of our Western history of modern art or on any postwar *West Art Map*.

It is only today, in our postmodern and poststructuralist setting with new shifts in interest and a transdisciplinary regard that includes sociological curiosity, that we may potentially discover dropping out as a practice in the social space, as a performative action, as a specific case of artistic articulation – in fact, as something that has for quite some time been accompanying the development of art and its social conditions as an unseen, unnoticed and unnoted opposition.

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What if now we try to project the image I have drawn from the Western art dropout, the *Kunstausstieger*, onto the postwar situation in Eastern Europe?

Taking the clichéd image of a regimented socialist culture, it seems to me that the political context changes the entire scenario, making it far more delicate and complex. To exclude oneself from a field of cultural practice, to renounce the role of artist, to resign one's position in the field, to switch one's field – this all seems dramatically

⁷ The background for my contribution to the *East Art Map* symposium is a book I am currently writing, entitled *The Principles of the Theory and History of Dropping Out of Art / Grundlagen zur Theorie und Geschichte des Kunstausstiegers*.

different here. Even to describe the phenomenon would be somehow difficult. I think we would first have to divide the artistic field into official and unofficial parts. If, for instance, you had a position in the officially recognized art world – which would mean a privileged position with, usually, specific political implications – I really do not see how you could withdraw from it. But if you did do so, it would mean either to appear (or disappear) in the unofficial art scene or to pull out of the game altogether. There was also a third way to drop out of the official art scene (which of course may not have applied to all the different postwar periods and systems) – namely, the way into prison.

But what if you had a position in the unofficial art world? Wasn't it here that potentially oppositional practices, critical social and intellectual energies, were often formed and articulated, and wouldn't leaving this scene demonstrate a lack of solidarity or even possibly put the remaining network at risk? In such informal structures, leaving would also mean that, once you had pulled yourself out of the game, your previous work would probably disappear, since there was no art market or institutional system to keep it alive, as was the case with Posenenske and Lozano. And finally, why would you want to leave? For many in the Eastern art world, wasn't this space one of the very few alternatives to the regulated and regimented public space with its cultural ideologies and stereotypes? I have no case studies with which to answer any of these questions on an empirical level, but perhaps you do.

The concept of the *Kunstausstieg* I am proposing involves the more or less free decision of a subject who prefers to cease his or her artistic activity rather than continue it. There is a certain degree of sovereignty in such a decision, which is partly a product of the liberal character of the Western societies and their notion of the arts as autonomous. How much sense does it really make to extend this concept of the *Kunstausstieg* to a historical situation in which, for most of the time and in most places, such autonomy was not given? As we know, for authoritarian regimes and their little brothers, the socialist democracies, the opposite of the dropping-out scenario was something far more significant. For not only were there all those artists who did not willingly remove themselves from the game but were *actively excluded* from it by the system or society itself – with the gulag being the extreme version of such exclusion – but there was also the everyday routine of small troubles, social pressures, and a whole range of possible official and unofficial restrictions.

If, finally, we take into consideration such a silhouette of repression, we might reach an unexpected conclusion, namely, *the history of art might very well include also those who escaped such difficulty before it could arise by excluding themselves from even the option of an artistic identity and practice before someone else had the chance to exclude them*. It does not seem too absurd here to contemplate a negative: a good part of the composition of the art field is the result of all those who never entered it. For the West, we can always say, well, maybe art is too boring, too intellectual, or not intellectual enough, so there will always be some people who would rather be a doctor or a stockbroker. There is an ironic logic here: the people who are in the art field represent that part of the population who did not refuse to join this field.

But we cannot really say that this is true also for the East and its past.

By telling the story of Lozano and Posenenske, we make their dropping out visible as a gesture, a practice, and an art-political statement that for some time has been one of the blind spots on which art historians base their profession. If you attempt to remap the history of art in the European part of the post-socialist world, it is important not only to include those who were pulled out of that history and its making in real time by the official authorities, but also to think of a way to include those who pulled themselves out of this history before they even had the chance to play a role in it. Their self-exclusion is not something marginal, for doesn't it in itself embody a form of cultural and political repression? In my understanding, we should, at least, avoid the reproduction of silence and exclusion and seek instead a way to encircle, measure, and entitle the blind spots that the *East Art Map* will *necessarily produce*.

Let me add a final observation that seems relevant for the post-socialist period.

With the dismantlement of the political and cultural logic that had predominated in the Eastern European societies, and with the shift in orientation toward the West and its art system, art market, the biennial circus, and so on, the whole scenario changed extremely fast. The discussion around Moscow conceptualism and NOMA is a good example of this. The unofficial art field, which, with its inherent processes and codifications contributed to

the production of an identity, a sense of resistance and freedom, now lost its frame, its political meaning, and its social significance. As we might be able to see more clearly today, there exists an entire generation of artists who, somewhere between the late eighties and mid-nineties, seem to have gotten stuck or lost between the past and the future.

My point is: might not the *East Art Map* need also a little legend to indicate those who deliberately brought their own artistic activity to a close shortly after the evaporation of the political conditions that had been responsible for its coming into being in the first place? I probably do not have to repeat that, of course, these protagonists left the stage without ever entering the archive of cultural memory.