

## KUNST VERLASSEN 6

### Stepped out, pulled in. What results from creating the visibility of disappearance?

As the first speaker of this symposium, I was asked to give an introduction on »the essence« of its topic. But thinking about the issues that we will have to discuss here under the headline »Archiving Disappearance», I felt I should rather start our meeting by doubting the actual essence of its topic.

My lecture contains three parts, the first one being more personal, the second one more systematic, where I will propose you a constitutive terminology of the *Kunstausstieg*, which means the withdrawal from art. With the third part may I in fact introduce you to some aporetic moments that I see for our conversation on how we could handle some phenomenon that is qualified by disappearances.

Let me first give you a personal prefix about my work on the subject that I call the *Kunstausstieg*. *Kunstausstieg* – a word, that the German language allows you to create – means leaving art / withdraw from art / step out or drop out of art. And I call the person, who does so, the *Kunstausstieger*. We will get back to this terminology later.

#### FIRST PART

By 2002 I was passionate about the idea, that you could just turn around and say goodbye to the art market, the exhibition market, the biennial events, and just everything that makes art what it is today.

I am not the only one who felt and who feels that during the past decades, the parameters, by which the art world is shaped, had finally given up resistance against the cheap amusement of collectors and their financial speculation, against curatorial narcissism, against the often childish, a-historic and anti-intellectual outcome of what we consider to be contemporary artistic practice. And the so-called »resistance« of the more politicised left wing of the art field has come to arrange itself with its marginal influence on what is going on.

Emancipation, Independence, Literacy, Sobriety or Sustainability, any of these characteristics were and are not demanded to appear on the list of virtues, that would enhance your symbolic capital in the art worlds interplay today.

But I could not divide my notion of the arts and my personal desire from these attributes. I liked to become convinced by complex aesthetic argumentation, by a smart and educated brain, and a plain experience. I hoped to learn from art instead of »criticizing« it, and to use it, as a curator, or just as a citizen, for collective cognition. So why not be radical and turn around, let them do the art dance, like Tino Seghal likes to do it, and go seek people with whom you could get beyond youth culture and the industries of post-bourgeois pretension. If the social reproduction of the artistic field was mainly driven by its economization and its increasing mass media character – which means: the loudness, not the imaginative intelligence of the voices participating in it – than the exclusion and disappearance of a certain set of practices and competences that I had liked in this field, seemed self-evident.

»Never change a running system.« This technical logic of the digital age has become its cultural ideology, too. But »Emancipation« meant, to never run a system, that doesn't change.

If that sounds niggling to you: I agree. Criticizing the art world like this appears cheap. But feelings are true and they can in fact cause unease and disaffection 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, neither 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.

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Instantly you deal with paradoxes. I wanted to make it in an historical perspective: I was convinced I would find artists that somewhere in the past had stopped their practice and that had left the art system – and that I could take as example and explore.

But how do you identify and find an *Ex-Artist*? You cannot google for Ex-Artists, neither call their gallery. Isn't everything that *makes* your subject the idea, that this protagonist, that you wish to stand facing, had left the scene on which you yourself still remain? Then where will you go and look for him or her? Backstage? Tricky constellation!!

Art historians – as became obvious very quickly during my research – had never had the intention to write down the story of people, who had stopped talking to them ... Don't expect them to help you. Art historical libraries even happen to be the worst place for the remembrance of such informal and unclassified movements like the ones who desert from the institutional machinery of art.

The best thing you can do is finally, to ask the people around you if they remember having lost some artist out of sight. Make them talk about it! Find out if anyone knows someone who has in fact disappeared and hope, that he or she has left some trace before evaporating – lets say: artwork for example.

That would be good, because to do an exhibition, you need something to exhibit. Any Material, any trace that you can put in a space and *see*, is welcome here. But what exactly do you *look* for, when you seek for *Kunstaussteiger*s? What are you hoping to find and grab and put up on the wall? A couple of Last Art Pieces? Good bye letters? Family pictures? What for? When someone disappears, what else does it mean than that all that remains is memory? There is no trace of disappearance really, but only traces of fading visibility.

It is almost unfair: the more material you carried together, especially art works, the more their enduring presence would blanket the drop out. The tricky thing is, that you will hardly talk about the becoming of an Ex-Artist by exhibiting what this someone did at the time when he or she was still acting as an artist. Where as most of what you can exhibit will easily document and prove an artists' activity, almost nothing will be able to show that this activity has come to an end. You just simply *cannot exhibit* the artistic inactivity that results from an artists' decision, not any longer to be, or to work as, or to play the role of, an artist.

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There's only one but decisive exception: What if the drop out of an artist was a *gesture*? Something that you do to make it being seen by others as an intentional movement, something that is done to be *perceived*. This would mean that it had a visible character; that we had even to consider it as an artistic articulation, as a special, let us say: critical, precarious case of artistic practice. And that would mean, that with some chance it might be exposable.

As I have shown in some of my earlier studies, the American artist Lee Lozano is a significant case, that fits into that profile. She intentionally stopped her career, her practice around 1970. And she said she would do so and she did also say why. In her »Language Pieces« – which you can imagine as conceptual notations, in which she gave herself guidelines that she would follow precisely – Lee Lozano announced and then also documented her

withdrawal from the art world. A significant and charming example is the »Withdrawal Piece<sup>iii</sup> from February 8, 1969, that says:

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

Dick Bellamy was Lee Lozano's gallerist at that time.

From 1969 till 1971 Lozano had step by step said good bye to the economic, topographic, institutional, emotional rules of her life as an artist. The language pieces seemed to guide and sustain her to do so. As she entitled and formalised them as »Pieces« she clearly saw – and *draw* – them as her artistic language at that time. A language though, that guided her into silence. She died in 1999. She did not readopt her art practice.

I had finally found the first case study for my exhibition project and brought some Language Pieces from New York. Lozano was the first answer to my curatorial dilemma of how to show the disappearance of an artist: I could show the ending of her practice.

But meanwhile I had experienced that there seemed to be no historical or theoretical work that had been done on the dropout phenomenon at all. I decided to not only do an exhibition, but to systematically research this phenomenon on an empiric, methodological and theoretical level, constituting an ongoing series of studies, this lecture here being number six in this series. Number 10 plus something will be the book that I am currently writing, entitled »The Principals of a Theory and a History of the Dropping Out of Art« (Translation). And I chose to let Number one – my scheduled exhibition – play the role of giving first visibility to the drop out subject. As an exhibition maker I felt I could not talk about this subject in a white cube without creating an imaginary, symbolic representation of it. I came to conclude, that I would do an appropriate first job, if I already started by bringing into sight the *idea* of dropping out, the *desire* to go beyond the capacities of artistic practice, the *rejection* of an artists' role and the *denial* of participating in the art worlds game. An exhibition can talk about the invisible by the use of the visible. Spectators have an instrument to see through the visual data a subject that is beyond physical representation in space: that is their imagination. That's why we deal with art altogether, and that's something curators can make use of.

Study number one was finally entitled »gestures of disappearance«s to headline the gesture aspect that I considered to be essential for the visibility of the drop out. I surrounded Lee Lozano's Language Pieces by works of Chris Burden, Arthur Cravan and Bas Jan Ader, who are not *Kunstausstiegers* like Lee Lozano, but who expressed radical doubt on the conditions of art and on their position inside the artistic field, and who went into extreme precarious situations of artistic practice. Pointing on their rejection of modern artistic role models, which was especially formative for the time around 1970 – that means: early post-modernism – seemed to give an appropriate foundation for the understanding of the whole drop out dynamic, that you would not automatically enlighten. If you rowed up a couple of more or less significant art drop outs, like the MUMOK Museum Vienna did in his show »Kurze Karrieren« two years later.

This is where I finish with the description of my exhibition project from 2002, to become more systematic and to approach the point I wanna make.

## SECOND PART

If I have given a definition of what I propose to be considered as a *Kunstausstieg*<sup>iii</sup> – as the artistic drop out or withdrawal – and I will repeat it here as a proposal for a better understanding of what we might choose to talk about, when we talk about »disappearance«.

I follow the definition I have given in the Belgian magazine »De Witte Raaf«: A *Kunstausstieger* is a social actor whom we are able to locate in the field of art somewhere in the past, and whom we are unable to locate in this same field at a later time, *and who wished so*. This last half sentence »*and who wished so*« is essential.

What does that imply?

1. *Leaving art*, from my perspective, can only mean *leaving the field of art*. Nothing other makes sense to me. And *leaving the field of art*, means to say good by to *all* the elements, functions and structures, that are constitutive for this field and its inherent affairs. And that means withdrawing from the economic, the institutional, the social, the psychological parameters and its urban settings that create and frame an artists' existence in modern and post-modern societies. It means to stop *any* practice in the field of art, and to put away the attribute and role model »artist«, and to leave the field of art-related discourse. This first parameter of my definition allows us to widen it up and also include other actors of the art field, like curators, gallery owners, critics, teachers and others. It is useful to do so, because artistic practice potentially includes all these activities today, the different roles in the field interchange and inseparably overlap.
2. We should only consider an active and intentional withdrawal from the field of art as the kind of disappearance that we emphasize. Being censored by a dictatorial regime is something very different<sup>iv</sup>, as well as having no success, suffering from economic distress and finally give up, as well as an accident or suicide.
3. The withdrawal has to be accomplished. Only a step that has been done in the past can be concerned as a disappearance from the scene. Any declaration, quotation, pretence or symbolization of withdrawal remains inside the field.
4. You cannot withdraw from a system you do not belong to. To give up a position in the art field, you need to hold such a position first. The disappearance is a quality that is relative to the preceding visibility.

If we follow this definition, we can easily identify cases, that are not a withdrawal from art. For example:

1. Stop to produce artwork. Duchamp showed us – and already some romantic artists long before him – that you do not need to produce art work to be an artist and to hold a position in the field. Production is no basic requirement for being accepted as an artist. To stop producing work can just be a change of practice in the same field.
2. The terminologies of the an-artist (Duchamp), the non-artist (Allan Kaprow), and the anti-artist are whether dialectical terms or they are just specific concepts of what an artist is, and what he or she should do.
3. If you are an artist and become a curator, you do not withdraw from anything than just a specific role model. In fact, all you do is to change your position inside the art field, but maybe not even your practice. There are so many activities in the art field, that do overlap, that it makes no sense to look for any essential distinction between, artist, entertainer, curator, researcher, critic etc.
4. Anything that we consider as the fusion of art and life. Art is just one of those things that we may practice and precede in our lives or not. And what we consider as such a practice, and how we call it, is nothing other than a conviction that is relative to our surrounding social and terminological environment. You're free to live your private fusion of what ever you want to. Cook your dish – and believe you are practicing physics. As soon as the community of physicist acknowledges your experimentation as relevant to them, it *will be* physics – independently from what *you* wanted it to be. If all they do is to enjoy your tasty dish, they will only ask for dessert. If nobody cares at all, it's just your private spleen – it doesn't matter how you call it. We should avoid to confound the dropping out of art with any modern ideas and myths about border phenomenon. In modern times, a general drop out tendency is constitutive for our notion of art, since art claims its essence as a checkpoint to The Other, The Utopian, The Outside, or Life. With regard to the normality, rationality, reality of the Social, the artist is even the social drop out stereotype.

### THIRD PART

This is the part with the bad news.

We have already seen that exhibiting *Kunstaussteiger* isn't evident. And even if you manage to exhibit works by someone as significant for the dropout subject, as Lee Lozano is, that doesn't mean you automatically make her withdrawal from art perceivable. With the help of Lozano's original estate<sup>v</sup>, PS1 New York organized an exhibition of her work in 2004<sup>vi</sup>, after this artist had been discounted for 30 years. In this show, the only thing, that remained invisible behind the presence of all the paintings and drawings and also some of her Language Pieces, was her act of dropping out of art.

But I want to get a more general point:

If you agree, that »dropping out of art« – that we call disappearance here – for logical and practical reasons can only mean to step out of the field of art, how do we think then to be able to talk about it from the inside of this field, since this is obviously where we are, and since the fulfilled dropout is obviously where we are not. And even more serious is the question, for what reason and with what intent and hope we might wish to speak about the *Kunstausstieg* at all.

I remind us that, what we deal with, is the decision of artists – or theorists or exhibition makers – *to pull themselves out of the art world and to cancel and reject what had linked them to it* – and more than that: *to execute this decision*. Correct me if I am wrong, but I can see nothing other than this being our subject.

If we therefore agree on the definition I have given above, that speaking about the *Kunstaussteiger*, the Art Dropout, means to talk about a social actor, whom we are able to locate in the field of art somewhere in the past, and whom we are unable to locate in this same field at a later time, *and who wished so*, if we follow this notion, what has been left open until now is the question, *why you may actually wish so*. If dropping out of art implies intention – and I suggest that it does – we have to take the character of this intention into consideration.

We could find a million of good reasons to turn one's back on art. All of them are real and all of them true, and all say something about the constitution of the art field and the promises and the disappointments it holds ready for its participants. Some are more significant and some are less. An artist may change the job because he inherited daddy's company, or got passionate about flying airplanes. That's fine, but not very telling. I wouldn't make it our subject.

An other one may have a burn-out syndrome and retire with 40. It may prove that making art can be hard work – and that you can make a lot of money in little time with it. That is no big deal for us either.

Already more interesting is the idea, that an artist might *conclude* his work, in the sense, that he believes having completed, what he wanted to do, or that he lost his inspiration and doesn't know what else to add to what he had already done, or he comes to the opinion, that what he started was actually a bad idea, and that he'd better stop. Being strict like this requires respect and I'm sure it is rare. But I am not sure if we should say that someone like this *wishes to drop out*. Stopping the process appears more like its result here.

I rather think we are concerned only if the dropout has something of a statement character, if it tells us something about the constitution of the art field, about cultural/ political issues at a specific moment in history, about how artists see themselves inside society, and how their self-image evolves through time. The period around 1970 for example was marked by many fundamental disappointments of social and political and artistic utopias, that erased the revolutionary dynamic which modernist beliefs had often nourished. If the motivation for a dropout comes out of a breakdown of social hope, then, for instance, that is an issue, we should be interested in. And if we seek for emancipatorial issues, then People who stop to run a system, that doesn't change, deserve our attention.

The only problem for us is, that we *are* this system.

How do we, who are still inside the field, that Kunstaussteigers quit, handle the statement, that their disappearance embodies?

Per definition, the Art dropout is not an accommodating figure for people who deal with art exhibitions, art symposia and art archives. The Kunstausstieg is not a co-operative subject for us art people at all. Kunstaussteiger don't share our beliefs in art anymore, they don't trust in our institutions, they refuse talking to us and they don't wish to be addressed. They wouldn't criticize what we do, nor complain about our failures, and they'd regard our efforts with indifference. They are not where we are and they don't play our games.

Their disappearance from stage is a liberation or – less emphatic – a dissociation from artistic practice and discourse. It puts the fingers on the limits of our field, that mostly we dislike to be mentioned. Talking about the deliberate disappearance of artists, cannot mean, not to talk about these limits and the related breakouts.

It is not by chance, but by some necessity, that there is not an archive of Art dropouts yet, since not being in an art archive – and that means in an art institutional framework that defines your role and your importance, and that gives you a name and a number and that assigns your value on the market of art-field-immanent affairs – since *not being part of that game*, is what dropping out *is all about*. How much do we understand about it at all, if we do not come to understand *this*?

Building an archive means to make something *public*. It's a way to well organise specific visibility. What else does it mean than to highlight something in exactly the manner, that the structural parameters of the archive already predetermine. »*Archiving disappearance*« means nothing other than to pull back into the spotlight of our art world those who had chosen for themselves – and often under very inconvenient circumstances – to get out of that circus.

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Artists that had left behind them important art work, that is still visible in the field, are present in the art game, no matter if they wish to, or not. And that's fine. Lozano is a good example for that. After 30 years of silence around her work, now, since very recently, her estate has moved to one of the most influential and economically most performing galleries of the world: Hauser & Wirth, Zürich. Her work will be the season seller in Basel this summer. Aren't the kind of questions that we would have to discuss here questions like: how is this career post-mortem to be put into relation with the »Withdrawal Piece<sup>vii</sup> from 1969, that says:

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

If an archive of disappearance, that already includes Lee Lozano today, finds an answer to that question, it will be a good one. If not, what will it finally be able to talk about?

If today we ourselves made Kunstaussteigers to new mystic, or heroic, or anti-heroic figures of the next art season, we'd brought them to circulate again in the marked of arty ideas and events, which meant, to *reverse*, to *undo* their moves and gestures of disappearance. We would pull them back into the field that they had quit – not as active players, of course, but we'd make them become the undead of the art world, vampires, that we'd condemn to be nourished from our existence. But as we know from literature: If you pull the undead into the sunlight, they turn into dust.

We would lose our subject finally, or at least its sense and significance and – this is important: – completely miss the appropriate historical context and circumstances in which they have their origin. And the even absolute worst thing we could do, was to make the dropout an artwork. It would just mean to absolutely miss the point.

Let me resume:

Those who disappeared from art are not in an art archive of disappearance. Not to be in this archive, is their only common characteristic and is exactly what drove them, to disappear. If we manage to put them in there, to put the spotlight on them, we undo what they have done.

It is true, that apparently their disappearance has already been dismissed in a way, since we were able to discover and grab them.

Important enough to carefully find out what *that* means.

It is always good to have an archive, for it helps us to keep memory and not repeat yesterday's faults tomorrow. And the archive of disappearance is not an impossible thing. I just feel it might destroy its subject and its sense. It could only be appropriate to its subject and to the decisions, the attitudes and the actions of the ones it wishes to contain, if we resist against the temptation to fill it – and even worse – to try to complete it. The absolute fulfilled archive of disappearance is the absolute negation of its subject and any of its content. The more you put inside, the more you will erase. The appropriate archive of disappearance, in fact, is empty.

<sup>i</sup> and why?

<sup>ii</sup> WITHDRAWAL PIECE (8. Febr. 1969) – JAAP VAN LIERE; N.Y., USA

<sup>iii</sup> Alexander Koch, KUNST VERLASSEN 2: Kunstausstieg als kritische Praxis, in: Transversale. Erkundungen in Kunst und Wissenschaft. Europäisches Jahrbuch, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Paris/ Paderborn 2005, as well as in: Art 21, Paris 2006 (french translation); KUNST VERLASSEN 4: Waarover we (kunnen) spreken als we over het »uit de kunst stappen« spreken (Wovon wir sprechen (können), wenn wir vom Ausstieg aus der Kunst sprechen), in: De Witte Raaf, Brussels 2004

<sup>iv</sup> also see: Alexander Koch, KUNST VERLASSEN 5: Why would you give up art in post war eastern Europe (And how could we know)? Adding some new blind spots to the East Art Map, in: Mind the Map. History is not given, Frankfurt a.M. 2006

<sup>v</sup> Jaap van Liere and Barry Rosen, NY, were caring about LL work since 1992 and managed her estate from 1999 until 2005.

<sup>vi</sup> Lee Lozano, Drawn from Life: 1961 – 1971, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, January 22 – May 1, 2004

<sup>vii</sup> WITHDRAWAL PIECE (8. Febr. 1969) – JAAP VAN LIERE; N.Y., USA