

**LEE LOZANO'S *DECIDE TO BOYCOTT WOMEN* (RE-PERFORMED): FROM THE CONCEPTUAL TO THE POST-CONCEPTUAL MOMENT**  
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Analysis of re-enactment raises issues concerning notions of authenticity and the original, research, essence, the archive, ephemerality and creativity. While I'm not regularly engaged in performance or re-performance within my own practice, earlier this year I attempted to re-enact Lee Lozano's 1971 work, *Decide to Boycott Women*, for a group show at *Marrickville Garage* in Sydney that recreated works deemed feminist reference points in the art canon. My experience concerning re-enactment and its theorisation is therefore brief, however my work with *Decide to Boycott Women* resulted in observations that I'll discuss today both in relation to re-enactment, contemporary art's ontology and the overarching theme of the conference.

I'll start by describing Lozano's original work and my own version, highlighting the contrasts between them and the issues they raise. I'll then discuss characterisations of contemporary art as post-conceptual and post-historical in relation to the practice of re-enactment.

In its original form, Lozano's work was intended as a month-long experiment wherein she refused to speak to women in order to, in her words, 'improve communication' with them. Extending it beyond the intended month-long timeframe, she apparently went on to maintain this action until her death in 1999, the work ultimately spanning a period of twenty eight years. As a conceptual artist Lozano's practice included 'word pieces', instructions she wrote herself for actions to be carried out: theorist Helen Molesworth contextualises these as a desire by Lozano to, 'use art to live a highly examined, and hence thoughtful, life.'<sup>1</sup> According to Molesworth, Lozano's instructions to herself ranged from:

...how much pot to smoke (as much as possible), to what to do with all the printed announcements she received from galleries (throw them in a pile on the studio floor, or throw them out the window).<sup>2</sup>

Lozano's 1969 work *General Strike Piece* commenced on the occasion of her withdrawal from a 3-person show compiled by Richard Bellamy at Goldowsky Gallery in New York, in which she decided to:

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

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Molesworth, *Tune in, Turn on, Drop out: The Rejection of Lee Lozano*, *Art Journal* Vol.16 No. 4 (Winter 2002): 64-71

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* 65

IDEAS & INFORMATION RELATED TO TOTAL PERSONAL & PUBLIC REVOLUTION.<sup>3</sup>

With this action Lozano prefaced her withdrawal from the art world, which included the cessation of her involvement with the Art Workers Coalition. She recorded in her journal a sense of boredom and dissatisfaction with a subcommittee meeting of women involved in the Coalition at Lucy Lippard's loft, upon which she commenced *Decide to Boycott Women*. Instructions for this action included to, 'THROW LUCY LIPPARD'S 2<sup>ND</sup> LETTER ON DEFUNCT PILE, UNANSWERED...DO NOT GREET ROCHELLE BASS IN STORE'. Molesworth describes Lozano's boycott as having led to extreme moments, such as insisting she be served by a man when confronted by a female clerk in a store.

Lozano's final work, *Dropout Piece*, entailed her complete exit from art: having withdrawn from the New York art world Lozano moved to Dallas where, in addition to not attending art events, she apparently ceased producing art objects altogether. Molesworth writes:

Lozano realized that, just as you can't reform the art world by focusing only on museums, you can't alter patriarchy by bonding only with women...Not to speak to women is to render daily life a constant struggle, and I would proffer that in that space of difficulty Lee Lozano was more attuned to the problematics, limitations, and systematized nature of gender and patriarchy than most people on most days. And that, as I understand it, is one of the aims of feminist critique, to disallow the status quo to be perceived as natural, to heighten our awareness, to focus our attention on the problems of gender.<sup>4</sup>

While at the time some found it difficult to accept this work in the context of feminism, Molesworth believes Lozano's refusal to speak to women implied an understanding of patriarchy similar to her rejection of the art world, where both patriarchy and the art world represent public systems that result in personal effects.

The obvious difficulties inherent to carrying out such a work rendered my re-enactment stressful. While I only refused to speak to women during the gallery's opening hours on the one weekend of the exhibition, this challenging exercise confronted my sense of self in my interactions with those of the same and opposite sex. It went entirely against my nature to have to ignore every friendly greeting or well-meaning inquiry made to me by a woman within the vicinity of *Marrickville Garage* between 11 and 5 on the two days of the exhibition. The presence of men was equally troubling since it represented an opportunity to converse and explain my predicament; the relief this engendered contrasted with the discomfort I felt around women and resulted in an uneasy feeling of conspiring against my own sex. The fact I could only address the men within mixed groups of

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Hainley, *On 'E'*, Frieze, London No. 102 (October 2006): 245

<sup>4</sup> Molesworth, 71

onlookers rendered them somewhat privileged, and their tendency to relay the women's questions to me made them seem the 'leaders' of their group, while the women stood voicelessly and powerlessly by. While no individuals of visibly ambiguous sexuality appeared on the day and nobody challenged my presumption of their sex, such a scenario is possible and would definitely have complicated the exercise.

My re-enactment of Lozano was a form of embodied research in its confronting both my and the audience's sense of self, gender identity, and behavioural expectations, in line with Molesworth's idea of feminist critique as disallowing natural perceptions of the status quo and heightening awareness of the problems of gender. The work also raised awareness of re-enactment as a practice: despite having had the project described to them, some gallery goers seemed unaware that I was not, in fact, Lee Lozano, or found it difficult to disconnect her original idea of not talking to women from my own personal objectives. Most visitors were open to a consideration of my activity within the context of art, but for viewers who found Lozano's original idea confronting my recreating it may have taken things a step too far. The re-enactment also highlighted ideological developments that have taken place regarding gender identity, feminism, and art post the early seventies.

While some women found it challenging to be ignored and were unable to restrain themselves from attempting to engage me in conversation, others accepted the situation, either ignoring me back or discussing my undertaking in a private but audible conversation that didn't include me. Most importantly perhaps, my re-enacting this work did tend to 'improve communication' with women while I undertook it, in line with Lozano's original speculation. The women I encountered during the weekend included strangers, close friends and acquaintances, and the awkwardness engendered by my inability to address or respond to them lent the encounters an intensity they would otherwise have lacked. I frequently found myself imploring forgiveness via facial expressions or shrugs when I was unable to reciprocate a connection, and while some women appeared to regard my predicament with a sense of empathy or pity, my interactions with those who seemed angry at or threatened by my refusal to speak to them felt real and direct. The exercise stripped my interactions with women of the usual crutches and props of pleasantries and phatic expression, creating real, direct relations with complete strangers and momentarily intensifying the connections I already held with others.

During the re-enactment I had misgivings as to the appropriateness of its undertaking, wondering whether Lozano would have approved of this 'lite' version of her original and ongoing action and whether its documentation by others – or in selfies by me – detracted from its seriousness. Simultaneously, refusing to speak to women in the year 2015 felt somehow petulant and extreme

outside the political and conceptual context of the sense of strike or withdrawal common to the 1970s. I frequently failed in my attempt to remain true to Lozano's instruction, resorting to smiles and shrugs or pointing to the explanatory room sheet when directly confronted by unsuspecting women. The female gallery directors, while aware of my undertaking, were unable to resist offering food or making enquiries as to my well-being on the day, unwittingly compounding the challenge. The exhibition coincidentally took place on the weekend of Marrickville Council's Open Studio Trail, so this normally sleepy, suburban garage-slash-gallery received an unusually steady stream of curious onlookers, including small groups arriving by bike or bus. This fact transformed my action into a performance, as did the fact that when new arrivals were informed that a particular artist in the exhibition was 'ignoring women', they would seek me out and stare at me from the other side of the property's fence.

Lozano's original action was not a performance, and I had not anticipated my re-enactment becoming one. However my maintaining the action during gallery hours only, receiving visitors in groups and being positioned in a stage-like yard all contributed to a sense I was performing, which was troubling. My expectation had been that I would simply 'exist' in and around the gallery space – reading, eating or doing nothing – rather than confront an audience. Transferring Lozano's ongoing, daily trial into a show felt wrong and somehow disrespectful of the stringency of her practice, and this was clearly a learning experience regarding the logistics of re-enactment.

Despite its performative result, this work pointed to the fact of conceptual art's drive to situate art in life. Lozano's action remained firmly within her day to day existence, without an audience or archive, and apart from journal entries I presume the only witnesses were those directly impacted by her decision to cease speaking to women. While words such as 'action', 'happening' or 'event' could almost describe such work, perception of these art forms tend either to presume an audience or some kind of recorded output. Lozano herself used the terms "'Life-Art" pieces', or 'Life-Situation-Art' when she conceptualised this form in 1969; in Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer's 2014 book concerning Lozano's *Dropout Piece*, she contextualises Lozano's work alongside the projects of other conceptual artists, citing as examples Eleanor Antin's manipulation of her own flesh as material or Richard Long's walking as art. In reality however, these actions tended to occur within specific time frames, at specific places, and were often recorded via documentation or had their effects otherwise imprinted; to me, the sense of commitment inherent to Lozano's projects and their immersion within the everyday recall instead work by artists such as Tehching Hsieh or On Kawara.

Of Lozano's final work, *Dropout Piece*, Dorothy Spears has written that:

By the time Lee Lozano died in 1999, her last high-profile artwork could fairly be judged a success. 'Dropout Piece', begun in 1970, had consisted of removing herself from the New York art world, of which she was a highly visible member, and eventually disappearing altogether from the public eye. Her choice of burial, in an unmarked grave outside Dallas, was arguably the work's final flourish.<sup>5</sup>

When an artwork enters life, its re-enactment would seem equally to necessitate a situation within life, thus where Lozano didn't speak to women until she died my re-enactment should perhaps have occurred within the same bounds. Lozano's works belong to the precise time in which they took place and to herself as the artist: while I'm unaware if other attempts have been made to re-enact one of her works, the idea seems impossible to realise in its entirety. Lozano's actions belong to Lozano and their re-enactment by another individual would mean it belonged to them: for example an attempt to re-enact Lozano's final *Dropout Piece* would simply result in the giving up of art by an entirely different artist. Where life-art-pieces do not generate an identifiable event, involve any particular material, or result in a document, recording, or visible outcome, it may be that they escape re-enactment. To me, consideration of the potential for life-art-pieces to make such an escape renders them pivotal to considerations of the nature of art within the contemporary moment.

In 2013, Peter Osborne attempted to construct a philosophy for contemporary art in *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. This followed the publication of Terry Smith's attempt to define contemporary art in *What is Contemporary Art?* in 2009: in the same year, the online journal *e-flux* devoted two issues to the same question. These endeavours all hold a relation to Hal Foster's repeated consternation regarding contemporary art's sense of stasis or post-historicity, wherein the lack of structure or progress characteristic of the field is perceived to lend it both a sense of openness and escape of modernist objectives, as well as a sense of irrelevance or emptiness in its characterisation as a series of de-historicised, individual instances of self-expression. Contemporary art's defying definition, decrying definition or requiring definition resulted in theorists' recent attempts to provide one; however such attempts in themselves represent a certain nostalgia for the structure and historicity perceived as typical of the modern, raising questions around how contemporary the 'contemporary' really is.

Among the many characteristics with which Osborne endows the field, he makes a claim for contemporary art as a 'post conceptual' art. Perhaps in order to avoid a determination of the contemporary moment as 'post'-anything due to the prefix's association with a modernist sense of

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Spears, *Lee Lozano, Surely Defiant, Drops In*, The New York Times online, January 5<sup>th</sup> 2011 [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/09/arts/design/09lozano.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/09/arts/design/09lozano.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1) (accessed 21/9/15)

historical progression, Osborne clarifies his statement as representing an example of a 'speculative proposition' – a proposition characterised by a sense of movement between its terms that apparently rescues it from the sense of linearity perceived as typical of the modern. In reality however, a definition of contemporary art as post-conceptual does tend to embed it within the notion of movements begetting movements, especially considering Osborne identifies the sense of failure that surrounds the pure project of art's dematerialisation within conceptual art as having set out the conditions for the contemporary.

Conceptual art's idealistic push toward dematerialisation continues the sense of the liberation of the concept 'art' from the institution represented by the modern. This project's failure is evidenced via the fact of art's continued commodification within the contemporary moment as well as an increase in the requirement that the institution contextualise or validate art the more it resembles, and thus threatens to vanish within, life. The moment art enters life to the degree that it *becomes* life, as displayed in Lozano's decision to boycott women or cease being an artist, the concept art itself tends to disappear in its lack of distinction from any other thing or situation. The end of the concept art represents the true end of art; however the value with which we endow the concept means our institutions are increasingly instrumental to its framing or contextualisation in an effort to preclude such an end, leading to an associated lack of sovereignty for artists. In the instance the concept 'art' is liberated from its material form, the institution is impelled to accept any form – or lack of form – within a definition of 'the contemporary': the lack of definition that characterises the field relates directly to the liberation of art within the modern.

The editors of *e-flux* have likened contemporary art's evasion of definition to the machinations of capitalism, where the fact that individuals and relationships exist in a state unrelated to a larger whole masks 'the hidden ultimatum of an innocuous protocol'. At the very least there exists a sense that the indefinability of 'the contemporary' results in its hegemony, the freeing of the concept 'art' resulting instead in a state of entrapment. Where re-enactment as a practice engenders the production of new work within the contemporary moment, I believe the fact that Lozano's life-art pieces potentially escape such re-enactment means they most successfully embody the pure ideals of the conceptual. In a consideration of contemporary art as a post-conceptual art, it seems important to consider the sense of escape embodied by Lozano's work in our attempts to theorise the field.

The research with which I am currently involved concerns a definition of contemporary art as the end of art, as well as a sense of contemporary practice as informed by such an end, endowing the sense of art's disappearance within life as a representation of its final liberation. In relation to the

conference parameters concerning the 'many ends of art history' and its speculation concerning our ability to 'begin again', I argue instead for a final consideration of contemporary art as the end of art, for the impossibility of beginning again, and against the sense of optimism that tends to accompany this idea. This view both allows for contemporary art's theorisation within a historical context and precludes a modernist sense of new beginnings and linear progress within such theorisation. My attempt to re-enact *Decide to Boycott Women* may be illustrative of this idea, where the fact that Lozano's Life-Art represents an instance of art's pure escape is embodied by the inability for my own re-enactment to return this work to institutional contextualisation.