

The Story of Lee Lozano And Other Trickster Figures



Lee Lozano, 1967

I not only want to describe the imagination figured in the trickster myth, I want to argue a paradox that the myth asserts: that the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on. I hope to give some sense of how this can be, and how social life can depend on treating antisocial characters as part of the sacred.

- Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World*

Lozano's 'conceptual' work, conceived simultaneously with the end of a large series of paintings on wave phenomena, combine art and life to an extreme extent. Unlike most 'instruction' or 'command' pieces, for example, Lozano's are directed to herself, and she has carried them out scrupulously, no matter how difficult to sustain they may be. Her art, it has been said, becomes the means by which to transform her life, and, by implication, the lives of others and of the planet itself.

- Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object*

To understand the work of artist Lee Lozano, you have to tell her story. No one work makes sense removed from the context of her life, ethics, and relationships. While the same could be said of anyone, this is especially true in the case of Lozano. This forces a very different kind of art writing and criticism. My story is a retelling of stories from other art writers, including Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, Lucy Lippard, and Helen Molesworth¹. Those, in turn, are composite portraits, pieced together from accounts of Lozano offered by friends, lovers, curators, and art buyers. We can best understand Lozano like this – as a set of refractions, remembrances, embellished half-truths – indeed, as a myth.

Following Lewis Hyde's portrait of the trickster as a prominent figure in a variety of foundational mythologies in his book *Trickster Makes This World*, my story frames Lozano as a trickster figure in the context of contemporary capitalism and its dominant cultural logics. Hyde characterizes the trickster as a figure who 1.) identifies and creates boundaries where they were not previously recognized, 2.) transgresses boundaries to bring about and create new worlds, 3.) transgresses in order to undermine cultural norms, yet overall helps to sustain cultural durability. He goes on to create a portrait of the artist-trickster as an example of trickster-ism in a more contemporary context. He says, "There is an art-making that begins with pre-seeking (lifting the shame covers, finding the loophole, refusing to guard the secrets), that uncovers a plenitude of material hidden from conventional eyes...and that points toward a kind of mind able to work with that revealed complexity...the hinge-mind, the translator mind."² I suggest that Lozano is a trickster *par excellence* according to Hyde's understanding, and go further to consider the ways in which Lozano's specific brand of trickster-ism works to undermine and challenge, but also make more elastic those contemporary mythologies inherent to capitalism and Western cultural logics.

¹ That Lozano's story is told by many women, including myself, is funny. In "Boycott Piece" an extreme and anti-patriarchal work, Lozano renounced all communication with women, including friends like Lippard herself. This lasted roughly 20 years.

² Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 311.

Setting the scene

Lee Lozano lived and worked in the ‘New York Art Scene’ during the 1960s and 70s. I emphasize ‘New York Art Scene’ because this context was itself instrumental in driving Lozano and her work, particularly her later pieces. For Lozano, New York was like a planetary body with large mass – caught in its gravitational wake, she was pulled into its orbit and flung out again like a comet. Or, perhaps, as Lozano’s own density became formidable, Lozano and the ‘art scene’ became mutually deformed under the weight of each another’s gravity. Born as Lenore Knaster in 1930, she grew up in New Jersey and moved to Chicago in 1948 to study science and philosophy at the University of Chicago, graduating in three years. In 1956, the same year she married architect Adrian Lozano, she began a BFA program at the Art Institute of Chicago and declared that in five years, she would move to New York City, which she did.

Lozano’s was a consummate process of *oeuvre* (work) and *désoeuvrement* (unworking)³. Thinking open the mind and body was for her a ceaseless practice of doing self-opening and self-shattering⁴ things: painting, drugs, sex, psychology, I Ching, risk, danger. As a prominent figure in the ‘life-art’ genre that emerged in the 1960s — perhaps *the* person to take most seriously its radical possibilities — Lozano was her work to the extent that it is almost impossible for the very phrase ‘Lozano was her work’ to suggest the thing I mean to say: it tests our most basic grammatical concepts. If words themselves are predicated on and produce cognitive discretion (I cannot confuse an ‘apple’ with a ‘persimmon’) language is always already part of that empirical project we call ‘knowing’. But for Lozano, it seems, categorical distinctions between subjects (and objects) were eroded; ligatures like prepositions and conjunctions therefore also became tenuous. Lozano was loquacious and libidinous in language, a wordsmith in love with jokes, puns, and portmanteau. Her play with language was a perpetual writing of her personal creation myth.

As an extension of this word play, Lozano went by many names during the course of her life. Born as Lenore Knaster November 5, 1930, 4:25 p.m. (she wrote in one of her notebooks that this set of time-place coordinates was her “only true name”), she became Lozano by marriage. Around 1971, she renounced patriarchal nomenclature altogether and began calling herself Lee Free, or Leefer (a portmanteau of ‘Lee’ and ‘reefer’, perhaps), Eefer, and finally, merely, E. When we organize these names differently, it looks like this:

Lenore Knaster
Lee Knaster
Lee Lozano
Lee Free
Leefer
Eefer
E

It looks like a Carl Andre poem (they were friends). I don’t know if Lozano ever wrote or saw her names like this, but I think its typographical form is quite telling. There are several ways to read it: perpetually slimming⁵, reductive, essentializing; a bushy, feminist form; tornadic; reminiscent of her *Pitch*, *Clamp*, *Cram* paintings; an arrow pointing down. Naming was a way for Lozano to know the self as an indeterminate set.

³ Maurice Blanchot uses these terms to describe George Bataille’s secret literary community, Acéphale. From *The Unavailable Community*, 1983.

⁴ The term is Leo Bersani’s. From his essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” from *October*, vol. 43, winter 1987.

⁵ As an adolescent Lozano was portly; after the discovery of a thyroid disorder (for which she took medication throughout her life), she assumed a waifish, androgynous figure. Weight and mass were constant themes throughout her life and work.

Paintings: objects, tools, alloys, waves

Her early work emerged from its context, riffing with Chicago Imagists to create a raw and psychologically saturated mix of comic book-surrealism, a deliberate contrast to the sober, minimalist works proliferating in New York in the early 1960s. Her love of comics was evident in her representational style, in the integration of text and image, and in her affinity for word play and punnery. Her use of text and image was not conjunctive, in this sense, was never image *and* text, one was never supplemental to the other. Lozano developed an image-language logic. Emerging from art school and onto the art scene, she made cartoonish, raucous, hypersexual drawings of objects, body parts, and icons, but forms and figures drift among these categories in various stages of becoming one another. Jewish stars are tits, tools are cocks, a revolver shoots out the head of a penis, “Cocks! Cunts! Tits! Balls!” are disembodied and sold by size like pairs of shoes. Curator Helen Molesworth writes of these drawings and the series that followed:

Deleuze and Guattari’s theories of the hookups between machines and bodies seem mild-mannered compared with Lozano’s whacked-out erotic porosity. Penises sprout from ears and are propelled out of revolvers. Toasters get plugged into cunts. Assholes spit Swingline staples. Tits harden in excitation to cocklike turgidness...In a series of drawings of her studio, also made in the early ‘60s, electric sockets, water spigots, and radiators are conduits not only of energy and heat but of a sexual life force that appears ready to vaporize the architecture. Next came the tool pictures—hammers, wrenches, vice grips, all lushly painted and lustily suggesting the violent, combinative nature of sexual desire. It’s around this point...that you began to realize that the inanimate is not a working concept for Lozano—everything possesses some kind of energy, life, or drive.⁶

Lozano’s early work showed an inherent aptitude for inhabiting the anterior psychic space of the fetishized consumer object. As much a critique of the patriarchal élan that runs throughout institutionalized forms of power (religion and capitalism alike) as an invigoration of libidinous energy into flaccid commodities (of religion and capitalism alike), Lozano’s drawings occupy the charged space of fetish and explore, in the words of Leo Bersani, the “proximity of perversion and subversion”. Her art, as much as life, became a medium for playing with tools of power, and exposing eroticism as a kind of aggression. At once expressive and propulsive, her cartoonish animation of objects took on double meaning, showing movement through drawing while re-energizing and invigorating the inanimate. Said Lozano, “My objects have become numens.”⁷ While most writers are eager to say all the dirty words, as if Lozano’s work gives permission for vulgarity in a medium (art writing) that has produced its own perverse genre, what’s missed is attention to the profound energy and movement these drawings index. Like Cy Twombly’s paintings, there is a forcefulness, not just in the imagery, but in the exertion of Lozano herself upon and in her work, on the surface of the page or canvas, as if the urgency to express some individual and collective visual consciousness was for her a bodily imperative.

Following this series of raucous drawings, Lozano made paintings of tools – wrenches, hammers, razor blades, clamps. Her fascination with metallic form was as much an investigation of base, elemental materiality as an attraction to objects by which one manipulates and gains mastery over form. What was the relationship between the tools she depicted and her own? Within the space of the same painting, we see realist techniques of representation — detailing precise perspective and shading around a threaded metal rod, for instance — and sketchy, impressionistic plays of hue. A tool as depicted by Lozano moves in a kind of directional warping (of *its* form and *our* perspective) to give the impression of an object in movement or in its imminent becoming. The tools were often distorted – hammer with three heads, wrenches inverted upon one another, hammer head wrapped into its own claw, clamps that are distorted, hammers and clamps wrapped up in one another. Does this plasticity suggest the tools are exuberantly useful (a hammer with

⁶ Molesworth, Helen. “Lee Lozano” in *Artforum*, September 2006.

⁷ Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 25.

three heads) or useless by redundancy (clamps that clamp each other)? It is important to note the size of these paintings, around 9' x 11'; much larger than Lozano's tiny figure. A larger studio space on Grand Street in SoHo meant she could work at this large scale, and collect discarded tools and mechanical debris on Canal Street with Carl Andre. Her body became an intermediary between these modes of collection and expression.

A hammer, clamp, nail, etc. are named for what they do or what is done to them. As if looking at the same thing under a microscope at a higher magnitude, Lozano created a series of charcoal, graphite, and pigment drawings of metallic geometric forms in relation. These were her so-called "Verb Paintings" made between 1964 and 1967. This is the list: REAM, SPIN, VEER, SPAN, CROSS, RAM, PEEL, CHARGE, PITCH, VERGE, SWITCH, SHOOT, SLIDE, CRAM, GOAD, CLASH, CLEAVE, FETCH, CLAMP, LEAN, SWAP, BUTT, CROOK, SPLIT, JUT, HACK, BREACH, STROKE, STOP. The titles are both aggressive and suggestive, and tell us how to understand each given relation between forms. The paint, graphite, and charcoal are often applied so that it actually looks like the material represents itself, as though built up on the canvas to reconstitute its original form. These are technically virtuosic renderings of sheen upon solid. Lozano explained: "For me, each painting is part of a monumental form, so that all my paintings are just details of a form that can be extended to infinity or a point in infinity."⁸ Yet it is not the mere continuation of infinite form, but the expansiveness of form at different scale.

"In physics, all straight lines are really curved if you extend them far enough. And if you've been doing straight lines for a while, the next thing is to try curves. Where else is there to go but all the way round?"⁹ Lozano moved from solid, ferrous matter to light and energy. She created a series of *Wave* paintings (1967-1970) that merged an examination of phenomena of light and the arduous, technical labor of the body – both always factored by time. She intended for the series to be experienced first-hand, not through description or pre-presentation. Eleven vertical panels with "waves" of various curvatures extended (and exceeded) the bottom and top of the canvases. Each wave a different sherbet-colored hue. While the canvases and waveforms were vertical, the brush strokes were horizontal, creating a textile-like surface, whose textural relief allowed light and sheen to play like sunlight on a rippled surface of water. Viewers have described these paintings to produce directionally specific readings. Each panel has an even number of undulations in the overall waveform; these are determined with reference to the dimensional height of the canvas (96"). Each painting is named for the number of waves. *2-Wave*, *4-Wave*, 6, 8, 12, 16, 24, 32, 48, 96, and 192 (a graphite drawing rather than oil painting). Lozano exhibited the series in a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and specified a precise environment for ideal viewing – a dimly lit room with dark walls.

Lozano produced each painting in one discrete, continuous session. Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer describes the process:

The paintings are the oily residue of hours, days and years of drugged exertion. As a rule, Lozano was high – 'very stoned on hash throughout' – and listed in her notebooks how many joints she smoked and when, in half-joint increments. The higher the frequency and shorter the wavelength, the longer and more demanding the labour. She kept track of how long each painting took: the central form of *32 Wave* consumed an eighteen-and-a-half hour session, while *96 Wave* went on for three days. This durational dimension shifted her focus away from art's public reception and toward the private experience of its production.¹⁰

For Lozano, craft became a bodily practice indistinguishable from personal politic, a private labor. Through this kind of privatization of art, Lozano opened onto the possibility of resisting that other kind, the capitalization by which the entire sphere of art is simultaneously eroded and enabled. Molesworth again:

⁸ Ibid., p. 27

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 31.

“Lozano’s interest in the body as a holistic intellectual, psychic, and visceral apparatus was perfectly synthesized in these pieces, which are at once expressive, hard-edge, and conceptual...It’s easy to imagine that they must have felt totally complete, so complete that Lozano could experiment with the idea of not painting anymore.”¹¹ Of the Wave series, Lozano herself said, “I was trying to combine science and art and existence. One thing I always liked was this idea of energy that is not contained by the edges of the canvas...the pictures refer to energy and they were brought into being with a great amount of energy. The more waves, the longer it took to do them...the oscillations were high energy.”¹² Where Lozano began with the craft of painting as a bodily practice, around 1969 (with the completion of the *Wave* series), bodily practice became her craft. Like Isaac Newton performing experiments on himself – sticking a darned needle in his eye to see if color was produced from pressure on the eye (he deduced that light is made of particles), Lozano used her self as a medium of experimentation as much as expression. Her energy exceeded the frame of the canvas, flying into the space of everyday life.

From paintings to “pieces”

At a public gathering of artists around the subject of museum reform, Lozano issued this statement: “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 will not call myself an art worker but an art dreamer and I will participate only in a total revolution simultaneously personal and public.”¹³ The *Wave* series became both a precondition and co-efficient of Lozano’s conceptual practice. She began a series of “pieces” that were always conceptual and literary – she used her notebooks as the place to document, challenge, and dream herself. Her writing became exploratory, a way to test out ideas – the way one (and Lozano had) made use of treatments and study sketches for paintings – but also contractual: once written, she held herself to these exercises with very few exceptions.

This form of writing was an extension of a practice Lozano called “verball”, as in, the endless, libidinous rolling of language. Her notebook “pieces” sometimes turned into “write-ups”, formal means of communication on 8.5x11” paper, as correspondence, formal logs, or to appear in exhibitions upon request. She was experimenting with the plasticity of self through a kind of mastery of non-mastery, exercising the will as an aperture that can constrict and also go slack. In one of her notebooks we find the imperative: “SEEK THE EXTREMES, THAT’S WHERE ALL THE ACTION IS”.¹⁴ This experimentation was not toward some aim, not toward “self-betterment” or progressivist enlightenment ideals. It was an open process (not progress), closer to Theodor Adorno’s negative dialectic than Hegel’s positivist one, less about end-games and closer to something like a game-in-itself.

Like Hyde’s example of Duchamp’s “corridor of humor”, Lozano always had an irreverent sense of humor and propensity for punning and joking around. The actions of *Throwing Up Piece* (1969) were to “throw the last twelve issues of *Artforum* up in the air”, a light way of expressing disgust for art-world practices, politics, and publicity. Some of Lozano’s other pieces include *Stop Smoking Cigarettes Piece*, *The Lie-In-Bed-All-Day-And-Read-Comic-Books Piece*, *The Get-Fat-And-Lazy Piece*, *Keep Your Asshole-Virgin Piece*, *The See-How-Long-You-Can-Go-Without-Making-A-Call Piece*. As if to play out Newton’s Third Law of Motion, (“For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction”), she often worked in sets: *Masturbation Investigation* and *I Refuse to Masturbate Piece*; *Investment Piece* and *Poverty Piece*; *Make-No-Move-To-Hustle Piece* and *Hustle on St. Marks & 8th St. Piece*. Here is the instruction for *Grass Piece*:

¹¹ Molesworth, Helen. “Lee Lozano” in *Artforum*, September 2006.

¹² Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 30-31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

“Make a good score, a lid or more of excellent grass. Smoke it ‘up’ as fast as you can. Stay high all day, every day. See what happens.” she immediately followed *Grass Piece* with *No-Grass Piece*: “Go without grass for the same amount of time as *Grass Piece*, which turns out to be 33 days start immediately after grass piece.” Many of these pieces also happened in simultaneity with one another. The write-up for *Masturbation Investigation* notes, “Other pieces simultaneously in process: *Grass Piece*, *General Strike Piece*, & a withdrawal from humans & the outside world. I refuse to see my partner or anyone else.”¹⁵

In the write-up for the *Grass* pieces, Lozano documents her keen observations and the extent of her psychological stress. Of going without grass, she notes symptoms of sleeplessness, anxiety, “uncontrollable sadness, deathness,” as well as heightened communication and “idea rushes”. In Lozano’s observations, we see moments of euphoria and deep depression, joy and total boredom, every kind of extreme. She called this pseudo-scientific knowledge “infocfiction”, (Hyde might say this is “the playful construction of fictive worlds”).¹⁶ Lehrer-Graiwer explains:

The experience of self-experimentation warped her findings, confusing presumed cause and effect while merging fact and perception – thereby forming the basis of her hybrid notion of ‘infocfiction’. Heisenberg’s paradigm-shifting uncertainty principle, published in 1927, addressed the fundamental limits of how precisely pieces of related information, like a particle’s position and momentum, can be measured simultaneously in a wave-like system. As one thing comes into focus, another falls into blur. For psychologists, it’s the ‘observer effect’: the act of observation always influences the behaviour of the observed. And when observer and observed are the same, wires get crossed and sparks fly: ‘the body, like photons, changes under observation’.¹⁷

Lozano’s “infocfiction” was also a critique of institutions of knowledge-making. It was a way of fusing scientific reasoning with non-empirical logics of art and selfhood. As a former student of science, “infocfiction” was also a deeply inherent playing out of this broadly cultural dynamic opposition. As Lozano’s practice became increasingly insular and dense, her pieces began to have more social consequence. Three important pieces emerged:

General Strike Piece, Feb 8, 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*. Exhibit in public only pieces which further the sharing of ideas and information related to total personal and public revolution.”¹⁸

Dialogue Piece, April 21, 1969: “Call (or write/speak to) people for the specific purpose of inviting them to yr loft for a dialogue. In process for the rest of life...The Dialogue Piece comes the closest so far to an ideal I have of a kind of art that would never cease returning feedback to me or to others, which continually refreshes itself with new information, which approaches an ideal merger of form and content, which can never be ‘finished’, which can never run out of material, which doesn’t involve ‘the artist & observer’ but makes both participants artist & observer simultaneously, which is not for sale, which is not difficult to make, which is inexpensive to make, which can never be completely understood, parts of which will always remain mysterious & unknown, which is unpredictable & predictable at the same time, in fact, this piece approaches having everything I enjoy or seek abt art, and it cannot be put in a gallery...what if I stopped doing different pieces & just did the dialogue piece for the rest of my life as my ‘work’? I could move to an exotic place & do it there; it has no space or time boundaries.”¹⁹

Boycott Piece, August 1, 1971: “Decide to boycott women. Throw Lucy Lippard’s 2nd letter on defunct pile, unanswered. Do not greet Rochelle Bass in store.”²⁰

With the volatility of a free radical, we see Lozano oscillate between extreme sociability and solitude. She played out at micro level tactics of resistance and communality that were happening on a broader cultural

¹⁵ Ibid., This and preceding quotes, p. 33-48.

¹⁶ Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 45.

¹⁷ Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 64.

¹⁸ Lippard, Lucy. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*... (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 78).

¹⁹ Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 55.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

scale throughout the 1960s in America. The *Boycott Piece*, which she somehow maintained for over twenty years, may be the most extreme example of her public play of personal politics. Helen Molesworth suggests, “By refusing to speak to women as an artwork she also refused the demands of capitalism for the constant production of private property. That she elided the fetishized art object and women was perhaps no mistake, as both share the same fate.”²¹ By her cunning, Lozano withdrew into extremism.

Around 1970, the idea for *Dropout Piece* began to coalesce.

A force of gravity: Dropout Piece

In an entry dated April 5, 1970, Lozano writes: “It was inevitable, since I work in sets of course that I do the **Dropout** (note pun) piece. It has been churning for a long time but I think its apt to blow. Dropout piece is the hardest work I have ever done...it involves destruction of...powerful emotional habits”²². Like Zarathustra, she was pulled under. Where did she go? As Marcel Duchamp speculated, “I think the great man of tomorrow in the way of art cannot be seen, should not be seen and should go underground. He may be recognized after his death if he has any luck, but he may not be recognized at all. Going underground means not having to deal in money terms with society.”²³ Lozano went underground.

Dropout Piece straddled the line between art and life, life and politics, sanity and madness, abandon and need. Lozano’s friend Stephen Kaltenbach describes his own exodus from the world of art as “a love of secrecy and the desire to commit oneself to a gesture so expansive in time that its overall form becomes imperceptible from any given point.”²⁴ Lozano stopped participating in all forms of art world patronage. She no longer sold her works and ceased all forms of self-promotion. With *General Strike Piece* she had already stopped attending shows. She refused participation in exhibitions; most significantly, she declined an invitation to show in Documenta 6. Because she was no longer working to make money, she failed to pay rent on her studio, and was eventually evicted sometime in 1971. She stayed on friends’ couches for months on end, living the life of an itinerant, a vagabond. From time to time she made some cash working odd jobs, and eventually found a shared studio space with friend and artist Gerry Morehead, in addition to keeping a small bedroom of her own in a Lower East Side tenement building.

Lozano did not “produce” work in the studio, per se, but it became a place to play with (herself and) Morehead. They installed a piece they had previously made together called *Time*, which was, as Lehrer-Graiwer describes, “comprised of two parallel lengths of string nailed taut to the wall...that passed through a metal washer you could slide freely back and forth to change its shape.”²⁵ Morehead also recalls Lozano dancing wildly with a massive dictionary, laughing and reading as she pushed-pulled the pages around, exploiting the book’s percussive qualities. Dancing became central to Lozano’s practice now, as she appeared around town at bookshops, bars, and music clubs. Lehrer-Graiwer suggests that Lozano was “cultivating her presence as a strategically manipulated and exercised force...Lozano’s mid 1970s work was primarily concerned with movement and the study of posture, stance, alignment and body language. She choreographed walking into stalking, going out on the prowl and carrying a transistor radio in her jacket pocket...Exaggerating lightness and gravity...she danced constantly, twirling herself into an engine of reverie around [the] loft or out at some dive...”²⁶

²¹ Molesworth, Helen. “Lee Lozano” in *Artforum*, September 2006.

²² Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90. Nietzsche’s beautiful words come quickly to mind: “How much a spirit needs for its nourishment, for there is no formula; but if its taste is for independence, for quick coming and going, for roaming, perhaps for adventures for which only the swiftest are a match, it is better for such a spirit to live in freedom with little to eat than unfree and stuffed. It is not fat but the greatest

Thinking back to her paintings and her attempt to capture a certain force of energy on the canvas, her excess of that energy that exceeded the canvas edges, Lozano had by now exceeded edges of all kinds. Philosopher Simone Weil championed the work of self-effacement, calling such efforts for the sake of the goodness of others “grace” and the habit of self-servitude against which grace continuously distinguished itself “gravity”. It might be said that Lozano was subject to a similar kind of gravity, compelled by self-interest in each moment, yet this same force pulled her toward the ecstasy of self-annihilation. Lozano untangled herself from the trappings of identity, recording September 8, 1971:

I have no identity. I have an approximate mathematical identity (birthchart.) I have several names. I will give up my search for identity as a deadend investigation. I will make myself empty to receive cosmic info. I will renounce the artist’s ego, the supreme test without which battle a human could not become ‘of knowledge’. I will be human first, artist second. I will not seek fame, publicity, of success. Identity changes continuously as multiplied by time. (identity is a vector.)²⁷

There is something adolescent in her denials: she resists all external obligation as a teenager asserts autonomy by resisting parental impositions. Indeed, these denials are also radical in that they repeatedly assert *otherness* in the context of dominant social normativity. Lozano refused to produce herself in terms of a patriarchal, capitalist, positivist order. Yet as we will see in the following examples of radical denial, something tricky happens when one becomes unhinged from social modes of self-production. Lozano records the bliss of free-fall: “Drop out from world, no calls no work no obligations no guilt no desires, just my mind wandering lazily off its leash...I have decided what I don’t want and am moving away from it, towards (o joy) the unknown (thrill of all thrills.)”²⁸ Lozano was a trickster figure, operating along the well-oiled hinge(s) of cultural dyads, until she became unhinged altogether. I mean this in two senses: there is a notion of the trickster as mad, mentally unstable, and perhaps one would need to be to be as an outsider of the *logos* of cultural systems. But I also mean that for Lozano, the hinge itself – as a point of movement *between* oppositional concepts, became immaterial. Toward a true ambivalence as non-dualism, Lozano moved back and forth between, relating and separating laughable logics, until, like wing-beats, a draft was created. She was lifted by this updraft.

The story goes: Lozano lost her studio, slept on couches and took lovers. She shared a space with Morehead, and managed to keep a room of her own. She was active on the scene for another ten years or so, cultivating her presence and doing her philosophy. Lehrer-Graiwer reports that, “Before losing her studio, some of Lozano’s final painterly actions included cutting holes into previously painted canvases, creating openings (or exits) and ejecting, in the process, little discs of fabric like dropout satellites. She needed to vent: ‘confinement is near the root of my rage’. Dropout consolidated her ranging research into pictorial, spatial, temporal, anatomical, social and historical passage: ‘let worries fly out all holes at once.’”²⁹ We hear an echo of Hyde, describing the trickster’s propensity for seeking openings and opportunities: “Poroi are all the passages that allow fluids to flow in and out of the body. A pore, a portal, a doorway, a nick in time, a gap in the screen, a looseness in the weave—these are all opportunities in the ancient sense.”³⁰ In 1983 when the gig was up, the city (and the world) began to change drastically, Lozano got out. While someone like Lozano could exist among a hospitable network of free lunches and couches of the 1970s, the city’s turn toward neoliberalism meant closed shops and vacancies, a clean slate for speculation.

possible suppleness and strength that a good dancer desires from his nourishment—and I would not know what the spirit of a philosopher might wish more to be than a good dancer. For the dance is his ideal, also his art, and finally also his only piety, his ‘service of God’. From p. 345-6, *The Gay Science*.

²⁷ Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76

³⁰ Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 46.

Lozano moved to Dallas where her parents had gone into retirement. It was around this time that she started calling herself “E” and demanding others do the same. Her behavior became aberrant, violent, and unpredictable, yet she had sufficient mental acuity, wit, and perspicacity to speak with dealers and curators who had taken newfound interest in her work. She moved from apartment to apartment, finding money when and where she needed. The record of Lozano’s life during this period is sparse. Lehrer-Graiwer notes, “Persistent holes in our knowledge of underground, post-*Dropout* Lozano signify the importance of not knowing and not seeing as a vital extension of the privacy and incommunicability built into ‘Life-Art’.”³¹ She was diagnosed with cervical cancer and she did not want to fight it. She died in 1999. Lozano went off the edges, caught in a draft, through the canvas, underground.

The Artist, The Vagabond, The Scrivener

I want to briefly turn to two other (fictional) figures as a way of illuminating the character of Lee Lozano, to show some alliance of trickster figures within the context of capitalism and Western cultural logics. The first is Mona Bergeron, a character in Agnes Varda’s 1983 film *Vagabond*.

The original French title, *Sans Toit Ni Loi* translates to “without faith nor law” or “without roof nor rule”. The film follows Mona, a vagabond, wandering and making her way around agricultural suburbs and hinterlands in late 1970s France in the middle of winter. The story begins with Mona’s death – we see her frozen in a ditch. The film is a fictional documentary that tries to piece together Mona’s life from the perspective of those she encounters in the course of her wandering. This narrative begins when we see her coming out of the ocean. Already we can understand the material significance of these scenes: Mona moves from water to earth, a trajectory we all, more or less, experience from womb to tomb, so to speak. We also see Mona move from a state of cleanliness to one of grime, stench, dirt, shit, and piss. The magnitude of her stench is remarked on by those she encounters throughout the film. She doesn’t just end up in the dirt, the point is made that Mona “froze to death” — some more extreme version of the stillness of death.

There are two narrative structures within the film: the pseudo-documentary meta-narrative (which shows us the end at the beginning) and the straightforward narrative of the character. As these two narrative structures work with and against one another, we are propelled in a circle from the initial point of Mona’s death back to her point of death. These narrative structures also correspond to the ways we come to know Mona: in the first instance, a composite portrait of Mona is made through interview-style reports from people she has encountered. By design, we see a cross-section of class, race, gender, profession. Mona is represented and refracted by these others, and in this way, we also see the way her personage and predicament come to reflect the values, sympathies, or antipathies of these individuals.

Like Lozano, Mona also likes to dance. She loves wordplay, rock ‘n’ roll, and is socially unruly. Mona tells a few of the people she encounters that she used to work as an office clerk, but dropped out. She didn’t want anyone telling her what to do or how to live. There is another trajectory discernable in the film that traces Mona’s dislocation from capitalist practices; it is somehow also spiritual or metaphysical. She has a will toward absence, which grows and opens a through line that extends from her initial act of refusal to the moment of her death. When she refuses to participate as a productive member of capitalist society, she also dislocates herself from her own desire and from an individuated drive toward the production of self. As her drive for self-production diminishes, so too does her will for self-preservation atrophy. Paradoxically, the untethering is done in the name of freedom but results in death.

³¹ Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 95.

We can see a similar trajectory for Bartleby in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener". Beginning his work as a copyist in a law firm, Bartleby soon utters the passively resistant "I prefer not to", and by this peculiar phrase, begins to fray the social fabric. His passivity opens a tear again and again. Each person who encounters him struggles to find and meet the familiar resistance of an other self, by virtue of which his own boundaries become known. As with the characters who encounter Mona, Bartleby elicits confusion, frustration, and yet some strange compelling sentiment from those he works with, most especially the narrator. He tests the extremes of this performance with his life. Preferring not to engage in all manner of things, firstly labor, then earning, then moving, and eating, Bartleby just goes out. Indeed, he evades all attempts to enframe, enclose, and conscript. Out he slides past the familiar architectures of responsibility, sociability, work, past law and labor, past movement, sustenance, out through biological life, and perhaps continues in a draft past self, out to some essence other than human. He slides apparition-like out of the realm of appearance. He calls himself into question, and calls the narrator, the reader too. Watching Bartleby recede from view, we ask ourselves, *what is ethical?* and *what is a politics of withdrawal?* "I prefer not" is an utterance of intentionality and resistance much as evasion and openness, and its ambiguity complicates questions of agency and intervention for the subject and those around him.

With Mona, Bartleby, and Lozano, we feel the draft of withdrawal. There is a through line, a corridor, a trajectory from some last willful act to total free-fall. This is the line these tricksters identify and occupy, revealing some obscured truths hidden in capitalist order. In each story, the trajectory of the free-fall is captivating. The characters that surround Mona, Bartleby, and Lozano cannot look away; they are changed irrevocably, telling and retelling their story. Forces of gravity each in her own right, these trickster-figures make the world anew.

In (between) new worlds

There are several ways Lozano plays the trickster figure by *being* artist. As I hope is now very clear, her life and art cannot be understood as distinct, but as emergent factors of one another. I will elaborate Hyde's consideration of the artist-trickster, showing again, how hers is a mind "that uncovers a plenitude of material hidden from conventional eyes...able to work with that revealed complexity...the hinge-mind, the translator mind"³² by considering her trickster nature in light of some reflections on the social role of art and the creative process, thinking through Theodor Adorno, Lucy Lippard, and James Baldwin.

In his volume *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno discusses the paradoxical nature of art in relation to social and empirical spheres. Adorno drills analytically into what for Hyde is perhaps a more intuitive and interpretive (i.e. literary) understanding of how the artist is simultaneously a social misfit and creator of culture. Adorno suggests that art — a realm constituted by distinct forms of labor, logic, cultural and social production — is both autonomous and dependent on the so-called empirical realm from which it emerges. He begins, "Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity...Art's double character as both autonomous and *fait social* is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy."³³ Already we see art is created always in relation to its other, which is to say, other logics, labors, and social constructions.

Adorno highlights two primary aspects of this negotiation with otherness, examining the way art disrupts/continues the logic of empiricism, and resists/depends on sociability. He says later in the book, "Art possesses its other immanently because, like the subject, immanence is socially mediated in itself. It

³² Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 311.

³³ Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970; trans. 1997), p. 1-5.

must make its latent social content eloquent: It must go within in order to go beyond itself. It carries out the critique of solipsism through the force of externalization in its own technique as the technique of objectivation.”³⁴ As it distinguishes itself from the empirical realm, art uncovers its own epistemological ground, delineated, yet still contiguous with the empirical. The logic of art objects, production, and social practice is unique to itself but extends and derives from what pre-exists in the empirical realm. Adorno is better at saying what he means: “Emphatically, art is knowledge, though not the knowledge of objects. Only he understands an artwork who grasps it as a complex nexus of truth, which inevitably involves its relation to un-truth, its own as well as that external to it...”³⁵ We can begin to see the way these two aspects become entangled as art defines itself against what it is not, and elaborates what is inherent to itself. In making the art “world” something discrete, in the attempt to draw a boundary around “creative” modes of production that are distinguished from the culturally normative, we see that this boundary line *primarily becomes a ground for complicating such distinction.*

If art always does this, I think conceptual art and ‘life-art’ push even further, push to an extreme that is also a doubling back. Lucy Lippard illuminates the context from which conceptual art and life-art emerged in the 1960s: “The era of Conceptual Art—which was also the era of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, the Woman’s Liberation Movement, and the counter-culture—was a real free-for-all, and the democratic implications of that phrase are fully appropriate, if never realized...The power of the imagination was at the core of even the stodgiest attempts to escape from ‘cultural confinements,’ as Robert Smithson put it, from the sacrosanct ivory walls and heroic, patriarchal mythologies with which the 1960s opened.”³⁶ Institutional dissolution was happening all around, from schools, gender, and family to government, science, and knowledge itself. Yet much as this time was characterized for its cold-war polarization and radical anti-institutional sentiment, it also gave rise to a burgeoning sense of globalization, environmentalism, and “systems thinking”, for better or worse. These divergent cultural expressions, it has been postulated³⁷, were a kind of cultural metabolism from the shock of planetary self-awareness made possible by the mass proliferation of two images: the atomic bombings of 1945 and the view of earth from the moon in 1969³⁸. Heightened political awareness and activism took the form of disestablishment and social unrest as well as communalism and the back-to-the-land movement, in various permutations of the unmaking and remaking of social life. Art-making followed suit, with new forms including institutional critique, land art, and life-art.

Many artists practiced life-art, yet Lozano seemed to take its inherent ambivalence to extremes (as always), putting herself into question. Particularly in the 1970s, Lozano was *present*, yet perpetually repudiating (like Bartleby). It was clear to other artists and those in the “scene” that Lozano hadn’t just dropped out, she was rigorously making her own public and personal revolution, working out capitalist patriarchy on multiple fronts – at sites of “non-productive” labor, sex, language, knowledge, and consciousness itself. Because of this, the artistic imperative of *showing* (your work as much as your social self) took on greater significance. Although she refused to work in the realm of institutions, she also needed the social realm in order for her revolutionary practice to be recognized. In fact, her radical acts of cultural unmaking and remaking on micro scale could only have succeeded, in a sense, in their publicness. Without recognition, the entire project folds in on itself and ceases to maintain its radical significance. It is only consequential in

³⁴ Ibid., p. 260.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 262.

³⁶ Lippard, Lucy. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972...* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. vii).

³⁷ These ideas were the subject of *The Whole Earth* exhibition at HKW, Berlin, curated by Anselm Franke and Dietrich Diedrichsen.

³⁸ Lozano studied science and philosophy at the University of Chicago, where, just a few years before her arrival, the first nuclear reaction had taken place in a lab under the football stadium. Somehow it makes sense that she would have a preoccupation with energetic, systemic, violent transformation her entire life.

its social production. So committed was Lozano to this work, she wrote in one of her notebooks “I am willing to die in the coarse [sic] of experimenting with some of my ideas.”³⁹

If we understand Lozano’s as a practice that risked all, where she gave all, put her whole being on the line, we can also see that this self-sacrifice, when it is activated by a recognition from the other, has something to do with making new demands on the social/empirical realm. I want to turn, finally, to some very keen comments by James Baldwin on the nature of artistic practice itself, and what this has to do, at its core, with the ambivalence between self-sacrifice, recognition, and social responsibility. In a lecture delivered in 1963 called “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity”, he says:

Only an artist can tell, only artists have told, since we have heard of man, what it is like for anyone who gets this planet to survive it. What is it like to die? Or to have somebody die? What is it like to fear death? What is it like to fear? What is it like to love? What is it like to be glad?...The trouble is that although the artist can do it, the price that he has to pay himself. You can only have it by letting it go. You can only take if you are prepared to give. And giving is not an investment; it is not a day at the bargain counter. It is a total risk of everything. Of you. Of who you think you are. Who you think you’d like to be. Where you think you’d like to go. Everything. And this forever—⁴⁰

And in his 1962 essay, “The Creative Process:

Society must accept some things as real; but he must always know that visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and achievement rest on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven...The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides... I am really trying to make clear the nature of the artist’s responsibility to his society. The peculiar nature of this responsibility is that he must never cease warring with it, for its sake and for his own... Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover’s war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real.⁴¹

The paradox of self-sacrifice — and love — is that *you have to really give your whole self*. This is very different from just giving up, on the one hand, or from abandoning oneself through self-ablation and social renunciation (as in religious traditions), or from pretending. Wasn’t Lozano some kind of lover? Maybe she had no fear, had only love⁴². In Baldwin’s lines I hear an echo of G.W.F. Hegel from “Lordship and Bondage” in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hark: “And it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence, is not the merely immediate form in which it at first makes its appearance, is not its mere absorption in the expanse of life. Rather it is thereby guaranteed that there is nothing present but what might be taken as a vanishing moment — that self-consciousness is merely pure self-existence, being-for-self.”⁴³ What kinds of freedom are being spoken of here? For Baldwin as for Hegel, freedom is something that is *always* metaphysical and historically specific; freedom is psychological and physical; it is interpersonal and sociological. The possibility of freedom is conditioned and revealed by these dialectical sublations. This suggests a kind of freedom that is not *from* but always *of* being. This freedom does not resemble the images of freedom we see in America, in Baldwin’s time, Lozano’s, or ours, which has nothing to do with giving the self and everything to do with protecting resources.

And I would add a caveat. In love we show ourselves to an other, and the other is revealed to us. But just as importantly, I am revealed to myself through my lover. This is a process of mutual recognition of self and other. Lozano could catch a glimpse of herself as she vanished. We can best understand her work like this,

³⁹ Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 61.

⁴⁰ Baldwin, James. “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity”, lecture, 1963.

⁴¹ Baldwin, James. *Collected Essays*. (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1962; ed. 1998), p 342.

⁴² This is a lyric from the Fleetwood Mac song, “Gypsy”.

⁴³ Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Online text: www.marxists.org.

as with Kaltenbach's objects, as something that cannot be understood or registered in one moment, but rather as the exposition of energy, energy through time. We could write this another way:

E(t)

Yes, she became extra-terrestrial; I'm alluding as much to her self-alienation as her energetic orbit about certain worlds and grounds. As Lozano herself revealed, "I ain't goin' nowhere because I'm everywhere."⁴⁴

Circling back to the beginning, we recall Hyde saying something about tricksters bringing about new worlds. He offers: "in spite of all their disruptive behavior, tricksters are regularly honored as the creators of culture."⁴⁵ As in Varda's *Vagabond*, Lozano's story can be narrated in two ways: one, as a linear, (materialist, positivist) narrative from birth to death, the other through recursion and fecundity, by the telling and retelling of the story, by a vast dispersion of energy. It is in this way, through these transmissions, that Lozano's boundary-making and crossing and inhabiting and dwelling in ambivalence gains cultural significance. This is how the trickster figure becomes allied with the practice of Mastery of Non-Mastery. If MNM has something to do with dealing with power in a way that does not recreate dynamics of domination, I think Lozano made a practice of *playing* with these kinds of dynamics, her body and being becoming a site for the conscious and unconscious play of these forces through revelation, sublation, and the un-containment of self. If one is truly dedicated to the practice of MNM, it would seem that one must risk the self. Here is my question: is it possible to sustain the practice of MNM, to (literally) live with the kind of openness and uncertainty this produces? As Lehrer-Graiwer writes of Lozano, for her "living the self as an unknown thing to be studied and taken apart was very destabilizing."⁴⁶ To maintain life on the edges, at the boundaries, seeking the extremes, one risks madness (Nietzsche) or death (Lozano, Mona, Bartleby). In both cases, one is decidedly relegated outside and no longer in-between.

⁴⁴ Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 64.

⁴⁵ Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 8.

⁴⁶ Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*. (London: Afterall, Central Saint Martins, 2014), p. 64.

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