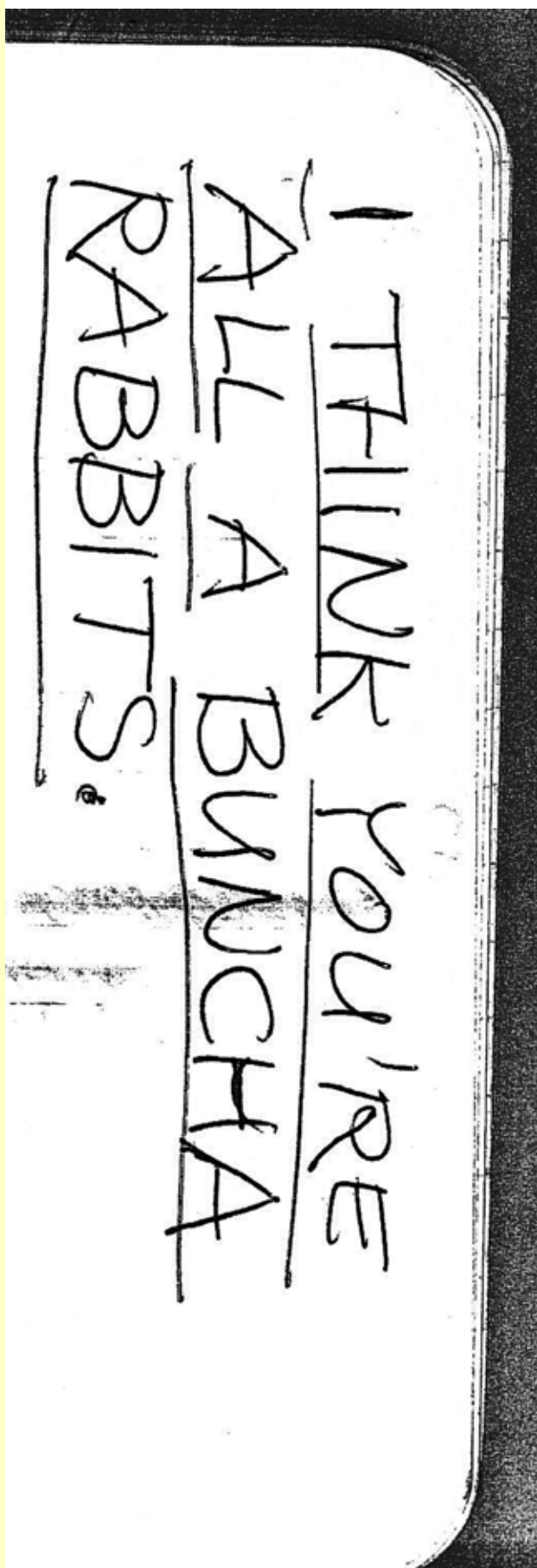


Gestures of Disap- pearance



Gestures of Disappearance, Once More

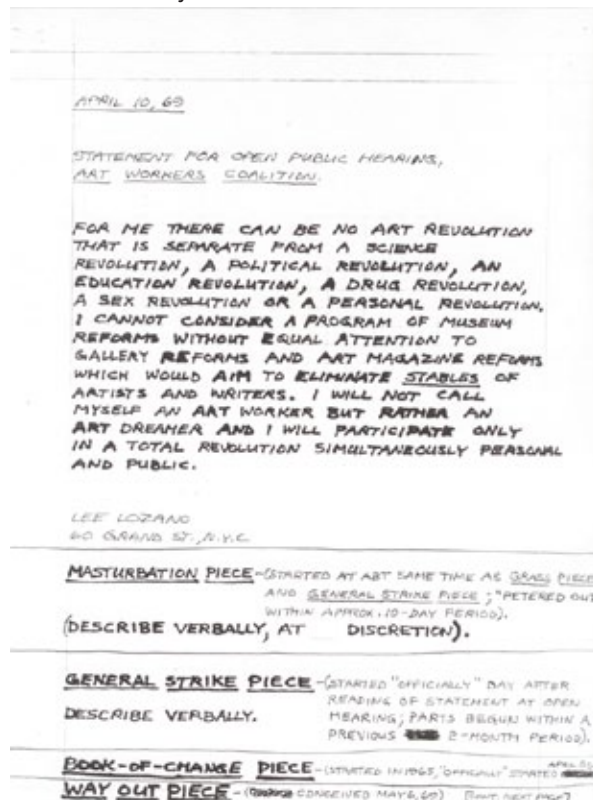
Looking back on a prologue, its melancholy, and its method

Alexander Koch

May 2015

A broken love means most to the one who walks away from it – because the leaver is so profoundly invested in the connection that he or she tries to influence and mold it until the very end. Severing the ties to another human being gives that bond a final form. Breaking up as the last gesture of a love? I'm not sure how much there is to this logic. But it rings true of many artists who broke up with art. Only an artist who is deeply in love with her art can be wracked by such passionate doubts about it even to the point of despair that she finds serious motives to leave it behind or at least put her reservations into practice. This was the point of departure for *Gestures of Disappearance*.

To contemporary readers, "in love with art" may sound like a romantic cliché, but what the four artists in this exhibition have in common is a core drive that is quintessentially romantic: the yearning for a fusion of art and life so expansive and so complete that it encompasses everything in a passionate embrace—the whole subject, the whole body, and indeed reality in all its vastness.



Their excessive utopian designs, shattered by reality, made them spiteful and sometimes bitter. In today's perspective, all four look like childish rebels who set out in inflatable Looking back after thirteen years (and several loves and break-ups of my own), it seems to me that Ader, Burden, Cravan, and Lozano had so completely fallen for a vision

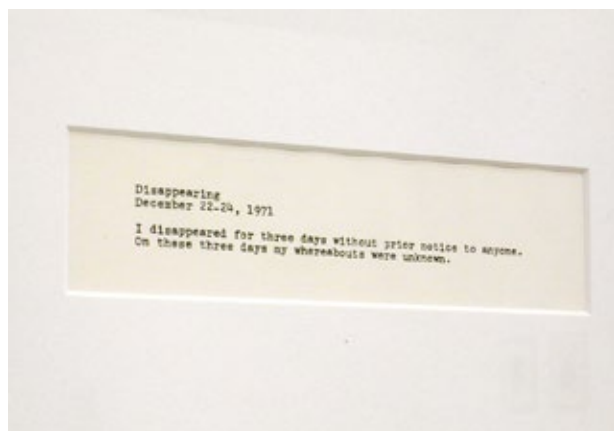
that their work inevitably came to be about its hopeless impracticality; the impossible quest to devise a realistic future for it. Their excessive utopian designs, shattered by reality, made them spiteful and sometimes bitter. In today's perspective, all four look like childish rebels who set out in inflatable dinghies to conquer the impossible because they thought it was possible—and had to watch as their hopes deflated. Their experience arouses our sympathy, it lets us relate to them as human beings, but it also makes them representative characters of their era. As I have argued in *General Strike*, tendencies urging a withdrawal from art were especially prevalent in the 1910s and again after 1968, times of profound social transformation. Whenever humans have collectively risen to reach for a grand and feasible vision, they have always landed hard. Not all passionate utopians have survived the impact.

**They will not get
me to march, not me!
I do not march for
modern art, and
I do not march for
the Great War!**

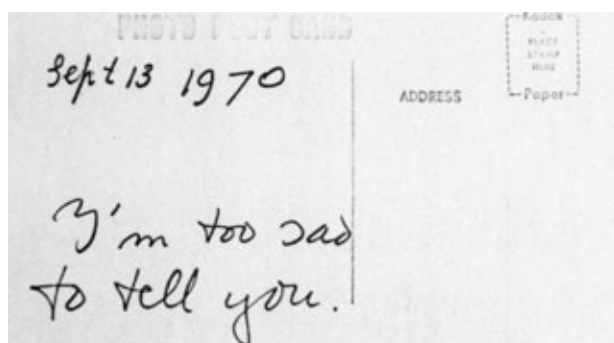
Maintenant no. 3 / October–November 1913

The urge to be free and break through barriers that propelled the swashbuckling poet and amateur boxer Arthur Cravan through the early twentieth century was not only broken by World War I; like Lee Lozano's aspirations, it also collided with the narrow-mindedness and timidity of some avant-garde circles. Cravan flew high and fell; one of the first to crash into the limits of the modern rhetoric of self-determination. In 1969, Lee Lozano's fascination with a "total revolution" of all domains of life gave way to an acerbic frustration with the vanities of the art world that eventually led her to leave art behind. She was also manifestly disappointed with the feminist movement, so much so that she refused to speak to women for three decades. Bas Jan Ader fell silent in his own way in the early 1970s; like a monk by the sea, he looked out over the void that was left after the bond between the subject's inward self and its expression in

language, its resonance in the outside world, had snapped. Chris Burden homed in on the same problem, and like Ader, he threw himself, his body, his existence into the balance in order to resurvey what was left of the freedom of art as a rebellious way of life beyond the well-rehearsed roles the art world afforded him.



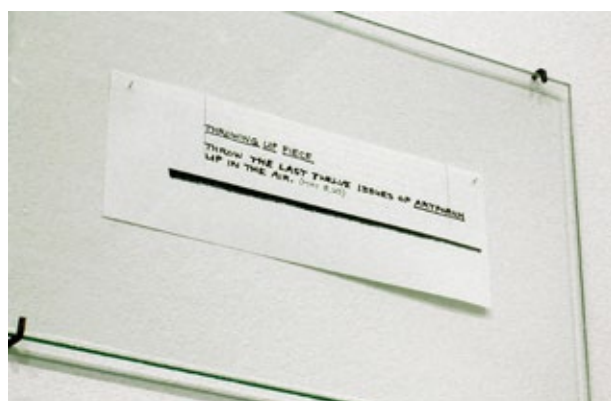
The results were sobering: images, metaphors, and lived moments of loneliness and isolation, of rage and sadness. What the gestures of disappearance bury is nothing less than an emancipatory model of the role and behavior of an artist; the belief that the individual's artistic practice can be sustainable and effective under the given social conditions. The exhibition's four protagonists drew different conclusions from the loss of a horizon they would fain have set sail for. What united them is that they chose, for a brief moment, to perform gestures in which the fading of their emphatic belief in the artist's role found clear articulation. The resulting eminent works made it possible to put these gestures on display in an exhibition identifying the positions of their authors amid the tumble of two of the twentieth century's crucial transformative periods. In 2002, as we looked back on the tendencies in 1990s institutional critique, Cravan and Lozano in particular seemed to me to exemplify what was perhaps the most radical form of institutional critique one can imagine: closing the door for good on art as a viable option.



Gestures of Disappearance was conceived as a prologue, the pilot show to a series of texts and exhibitions about the decision to drop out of art. The idea was born in 2001 at one of those moments when I wasn't too confident whether I still believed in the power of contemporary art to influence society. I was twenty-eight, with a teaching appointment at the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig, and unsure about my options. I asked myself whether dropping out and trying to chart a different path might be the better

choice, and I came to the realization that many others must have asked themselves the same question before me. In each generation, artists—and not only artists—must have wondered again and again whether to keep going or put down the brush, pencil, or camera. How did they decide, and why? What did that say about their trust, or distrust, in the potential of art in their time? There had to have been an entire history of a hidden movement of artists who criticized the social conditions constraining their practice—and its ability to affect those social conditions in turn—going so far as to break from art altogether.

When I started researching the subject, my initial question turned out to be a blank area—indeed, a blind spot—on the maps of theory production and the historiography of art. The deliberate abandonment of an artistic practice, the decision to shed the artist's role, the withdrawal from the art world: no one, it seemed to me at the time, had seriously looked into or even thought through these things. So *Gestures of Disappearance* marked the beginning of a project I pursued over the course of several years, trying to close that gap (see *General Strike*, 2011). I never produced a second exhibition, however, because that would have seemed to me to run counter to the core issue. The act of dropping out of art as such cannot be put on display, and in the exceptional instances where it can—because we can identify works and documents that make the threshold situation of a gradual or sudden renunciation of all involvement in the art field tangible—the point of the whole enterprise would remain questionable. Why should I as a curator try to capitalize on it by putting together a spectacular display of artists' letters of resignation? I had done something of the sort with Lozano and Cravan, but, although few people knew about them thirteen years ago, the art-historical literature had already taken note of their lives, albeit in incomplete accounts.



I am grateful for this revival of the original 2002 exhibition because it was an important project to me for reasons both private and methodological. *Gestures of Disappearance* was a curatorial narrative that operated largely without original works of art. I needed works on loan only for Chris Burden and a few pieces by Ader; much of the rest were photocopies and texts that were presented in typographic designs by the Leipzig-based graphic artist Till Gathmann. I obtained copies of Lee Lozano's language pieces and notes from the archive maintained by her estate in New York and presented them as they were. In Barcelona I met Isaki Lacuesta, who was working on a documentary film about Arthur Cravan and had compiled valuable material. He gave

me a shoebox full of photocopies that I used as sources for reproductions. We then arranged for a pre-premiere of Lacuesta's film in conjunction with the exhibition in Leipzig. I received permission from Bas Jan Ader's estate to make my own reproductions of several works and documents, and the exchange of letters with the estate and his widow, Mary Sue Ader, led to the discovery of film footage about Ader's last project that had never been shown in public.



The exhibition cost very little to produce. Instead we spent our time and the local production resources on developing a narrative about disappearance based on the calibrated alignment of different gestures of showing that left no doubt about their theatrical character. We used original works only when it made good sense in light of their status; in most cases they were dispensable. *Gestures of Disappearance* spoke with a curatorial narrator's voice that projected a literary form into the gallery rather than arranging pieces of art. Despite the formally austere mise-en-scène, it was a melancholy text that spread out over the four walls and tied its protagonists together with a recurrent metaphor, a sort of chorus: the image of the ocean passage, of being at adrift and at the mercy of the elements, of putting out to sea and arriving nowhere.



Arthur Cravan had noted that "the first condition for an artist is to be able to swim." This swipe at his fellow artists appeared in large letters on one wall, and in the exhibition it took on an existentialist edge. Cravan presumably drowned in 1918 trying to escape across the Gulf of Mexico and on to Buenos Aires in a sailboat. In 1975, Bas Jan Ader set sail to cross the Atlantic as part of his project "In Search of the Miraculous" and disappeared without a trace; only the tiny boat was found some time later. And in 1973, Chris Burden took a canoe out into the Gulf of Mexico, where he spent eleven days utterly by himself. These stories, images, and male myths—because that is what they are—do not make for good legend. The three men's lives, like Lozano's self-dramatizations, reveal them as victims rather than heroes. That is why the artists of the generations that followed saw very little in them that they could build upon. These four mark endpoints—tragic discontinued models of an outworn vision of art and the artist's role they were so passionately committed to that, in bidding farewell, they gave it final form.



GENERAL STRIKE PIECE (STARTED FEB. 8, 69)*

GRADUALLY BUT DETERMINEDLY AVOID BEING PRESENT AT OFFICIAL OR PUBLIC "UPTOWN" FUNCTIONS OR GATHERINGS⁺ RELATED TO THE "ART WORLD" IN ORDER TO PURSUE INVESTIGATION OF TOTAL PERSONAL & PUBLIC REVOLUTION.* EXHIBIT IN PUBLIC ONLY PIECES WHICH FURTHER SHARING OF IDEAS & INFORMATION RELATED TO TOTAL PERSONAL & PUBLIC REVOLUTION.²

IN PROCESS AT LEAST THROUGH SUMMER, '69.

KUNST VERLASSEN 1 GESTURES OF DISAPPEARANCE

ARTHUR CRAVAN
LEE LOZANO
BAS JAN ADER
CHRIS BURDEN

Galerie der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst

Kuratiert von Alexander Koch

Eröffnung: 22. Mai, 20 Uhr, Galerie. Es spricht: Alexander Koch

22. MAI - 22. JUNI 2002

Öffnungszeiten:

Dienstag - Freitag 12 - 19 Uhr

Samstag 10 - 14 Uhr

Galerie der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst, Academy of Visual Arts,

Märkerstraße 11,

D-04107 Leipzig, ++49 (0)341-2155-133

www.hgb-leipzig.de

28. Mai 2002

Film-Preview und Gespräch

Isaai Lacunata: Cravan vs. Cravan (2002)



Georges Duth
make some
and the

Samuel Be

uit: Come, my dear fellow,
kind of connected statem
n go away.

ckett: Would it not
be enough if I simply
went away?

ent

No (art) exit?

Joshua Decter
May 2015

Once something is art, it cannot be anything but art.
Art is stuck as art.
Such inflexibility is ironic given art's inherent flexibility.
Yet this is neither a 'good' nor 'bad' situation.
This is art's condition, take it or leave it.

Once a person is an artist, can that person be something other than an artist?
A person is stuck being a person.
There is not much flexibility there.
Yet this is neither a 'good' nor 'bad' situation.
This is our condition, take it or leave it.

We return to the question of whether a person who is an artist is necessarily stuck being – ontologically – an artist:
If an artist-person decides no longer to be an artist-person, is it possible to become another kind of person?
Once valorized as an artist, can the artist leave the scene of his/her own canonization?
Once an artist is part of our collective memories, our historical consciousness, can the artist become an ex-artist?
Is that divorce ever truly final?
It seems easier for an artist to disappear as an artist – for instance, in an inadvertent life-ending tragedy, or a slow fade into artistic obscurity – than it is for an artist to exit the field deliberately to become something (and someone) else.

Art cannot walk away from being art.
Art cannot relinquish its status as art.
Art cannot drop out of art.
Art cannot opt out of art.
Art cannot resign from art, and change its career.
Art cannot vanish without a trace.
The disappearance of art is an absence with presence.
Art is art is art; or so it would seem.
Art can be nothing, but it is still art.
Even post-art or ex-art is art.
(There is no such thing as "post-art" or "ex-art.")
Since art already contains its self-negation, art cannot be negated.
Art cannot go on strike.

The artist can walk away from being an artist.
The artist can relinquish his/her status as artist.
The artist can drop out of art.
The artist can opt out from being an artist.
The artist can resign from art, and change careers.
The artist can (not) vanish without a trace.
The disappearance of the artist is an absence with presence.
The artist is the artist is (not) the artist; or so it would seem.
The artist is always someone, even if he/she is no longer an artist.

Can there be a "post-artist" or "ex-artist"?
The self-negation by the artist of their status as an artist is a paradox wrapped inside an enigma.
The artist can go on strike (yet the artist's art will inevitably strike back).

(The Appearance of a Disappeared Introduction)
In 2002, Alexander Koch organized the exhibition, *Gestures of Disappearance*, at the Galerie der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst, Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig, Germany. The exhibition included artworks, and reproductions of artworks by _____, _____, _____, and _____, as well as other documentation materials. The exhibition examined how four artists of the 20th Century (ranging from the early part of the century to the 1970s), whose names will not reappear here in this text, staged real and/or illusionary disappearances from art, and even life. In a sense, the exhibition revealed the extent to which these artists sought to crash through the limits of perhaps already normative avant-gardist desires to push against the wall of received definitions of art, artist, identity, profession – even if this required departing from visibility, leaving art, or producing a mythos wherein the end of life became indistinguishable from a final artistic act.

In addition to deep research, Koch's curatorial method involved assembling constellations of artworks in various media – and perhaps also non-artworks – in an essayistic fashion, thereby inviting the viewer not only to look, but also to do the work of rethinking assumptions about if, when, where, how an artist is an 'artist,' and also under what circumstances 'art' happens. Regarding one of the participants, it was unclear if he was a visual artist in any strict sense, or more of a poet-pugilist-performer; in other words, a person being an artist in ways that did not seem to conform to any received tropes of being an 'artist.' Another participant ceased speaking with women, quit the art world, and stopped making art: i.e., she went out on strike from being an artist. Another sailed his boat into the sea, and apparently into oblivion.

And yet another performed – according to him – a three-day disappearance from the world. But how would one prove this? How would one document one's own disappearance? To visually document one's own disappearance would be, paradoxically, to reappear in the world. The only evidence of this disappearance-as-performance is to be found in the following textual form (which is also the artwork).

Yet the only thing separating this from the realm of fiction is our belief in the veracity of the statement, and therefore the degree to which we trust the artist's claim:

Disappearing
December 22-24, 1971

*I disappeared for three days without prior notice to anyone.
On these three days my whereabouts were unknown.*

Those were the days when people could disappear for three days without being tracked by a GPS signal emanating from their mobile devices. Sadly, _____ made his final disappearance recently from the world. Death, though, may be another kind of appearance for the artist.

In 2011, Koch produced the essay (and interview), *General Strike*. It offered a theoretical expansion upon the 2002 exhibition, laying out a systematic approach to artistic withdrawal, and providing the foundations for a historiography of artist dropouts.

Paradoxically, Koch's *Gestures of Disappearance* is reappearing at Bergen Kunsthall, although in our post-neohistorical age of reenactments, remakings and reconstructions, it seems that nothing is allowed to disappear forever. Neither art nor artist, perhaps.

Staging an escape from the cultural-existential-definitional dilemma of the artist might be one motivation for an artist to leave art: if art cannot be anything but art, if that which has become art cannot be un-arted, perhaps the artist can demonstrate that it is possible to be something other than the artist? Once art is art, art cannot be un-arted. If art is inflexibly art, maybe the artist is not inflexibly an artist, forever. By exiting art, is the artist engaging in another kind of (creative) self-reinvention that does not necessarily need to be codified as art? Or, by calling attention to a departure from art and its various economic, exhibitionary, social and other operating systems, is the artist leaving the door open for the exit, itself, to be construed as a final artistic act? And if so, doesn't this mean that there can never, truly, be a final act for an artist?

And yet, if I were to name an artist in this sentence who has withdrawn from being an artist, my act of naming would be a recuperative gesture; in other words, the former artist would be returned to a kind of linguistic visibility, on this page. This page, as it exists within an institutional exhibition publication, is the discursive supplement of art's contextual frame. To name the ex-artist here would be to contradict the artist's decision to leave art; un-naming may be the only ethical thing to do, so as to honor the artist's decision to withdraw from art. Still, my refusal to name the person formerly known as artist does not resolve all the multifaceted problems associated with artists who have either deliberately left art, or who have simply disappeared from the world (of art).

Here's an obvious point: the artist is a person before, during and after he/she is an artist. Certain people-artists have

walked away from being artists, from the whole art game, all the while still remaining people, as unbelievable as this seems. There is life after art, although it's hard to find. Yet the established artist who has resigned from her/his status as an artist – the artist who has stopped making art, who has withdrawn from participating in art's various systems, worlds, economies, cultures and social milieus – will nevertheless be considered a former artist, most likely in perpetuity. And so a former artist is always, to a certain extent, also an artist. Art is the monkey on the back of the post-artist, which means that there really can't be a 'post-artist,' per se, since to negate is to invoke what has been negated.

Once a person knows him or herself to be an artist (by writ of self-definition or other means), does the person-as-artist have little choice but to remain an artist for life, as if the condition of being an artist was indistinguishable from their identity or personhood? Is an artist an artist an artist – ontologically speaking? For some artists, being an artist may be a life sentence. This may partly explain why so many artists toil for years in obscurity as artists, often taking jobs in other professions – or working as an assistant for a successful artist while remaining unknown or under-known, which can be even more humiliating. In the United States, where culture is a largely privatized system, there is no meaningful economic-social safety net for artists (or other cultural workers), and so graduates from art schools often find themselves – particularly those from the working and middle classes – carrying loan debts that require them to obtain gainful employment. Art education has created further pressures for young artists to think of art as a means of generating income, with such anxieties amplified in the age of art operating as a financial instrument of exchange and investment in the art market's scaled-up industrialized system. Increasingly, it seems that artists cannot exist as artists without an art school credential, particularly an advanced graduate degree credential, which means that it is just as difficult to appear as an artist as it is to disappear as an artist. There are instances of artists being plucked out of their art school studios by curators, gallerists or collectors, who go on to experience rapid name-recognition and market success, followed by early career flameout. This is one kind of compressed art career in the era of accelerationism. Yet even the legacies of accelerated artist flameouts may be preserved within the annals of the Internet's seemingly infinite memory banks; or, in the growth sector of revisionist art histories. Statistically though, most artists are never able to support themselves solely through sales of their work. By maintaining presence as an artist on a range of platforms – from gallery to museum to Twitter – an artist at least has an opportunity to monetize their public presence as an artist. And this may remain the case even after the artist has exited art and its worlds, paradoxically, for how does an artist nullify their presence today in an age characterized by art's ubiquity?

For the art world's intelligentsia, perhaps nothing is looked on with greater scorn than the figure of the failed artist. Failure apparently signifies a devastating loss of control by the artist over art, career, and life. Failure reflects the worst sort of consensus about an artist, suggesting the inability of the artist to will him/herself beyond failure back in the direction of success. Failure, paradoxically, is the success of a

humiliating kind of visibility, for failure is never invisible. If the artist is not careful, his/her departure from art may be (mis) construed as evidence of artistic failure. There are more and less successful ways to leave art, in other words. In the recent past, however, it seemed as though it was still possible to fail in compelling ways in the art world; today, one can only fail badly. And so, perhaps it is better to leave art than to fail at it. Or, fail better elsewhere.

Amongst the artists of my generation who emerged into varying degrees of prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s, many were (and still are) highly ambitious, motivated individuals who grasped that in order to participate and have impact in the contemporary art milieu, they would have to operate as agents in the assembling of a positive critical consensus around their work – an interpenetrated social-professional network-community of artists, dealers, collectors, curators, critics, acolytes, hagiographers, and hangers-on. Temporary success – or the banality of mere survival – would be insufficient; a sustainable, durable form of presence was the objective. Absence was anathema to making it as an artist. By the 1980s, it was already becoming clear, to me at least, that the neobohebian, quasi-subculture of the contemporary art world was becoming a professionalized enclave – albeit with the counter-cultural trappings and the requisite discursive pockets of critical thinking (critical thinking not being anathema to career). But at least it was still possible to survive as an artist or a writer in New York with limited capital; today, this is no longer the case, which is why there is so much anxiety around economic precariousness these days. Let's get real: most artists, whether they have an advanced art degree or not, never get to the point wherein they can make a decision to walk away from a successful career in art. Success affords a certain amount freedom, and sometimes that freedom is abused; we have various cases of successful artists, art critics and others 'retiring' from the art world only to return subsequently from the ashes of their absence to stage a resurrection of an art career. Yet the bad faith theatricality of attracting attention to oneself as a self-resurrected art worlder is welcomed if not courted by certain sectors of the art world; since art is a half-truth anyway, some folks seem to be thinking, why not participate in other half-truths and ruses, particularly if there is some truth to those tricks? And so one might conclude that there are both ethical and unethical ways of leaving art and its worlds.

Art history is the traditional disciplinary machine that does not allow us to forget artists, as well as former artists. Art history would like us to remember, as much as the artist who seeks to exit art and art history may want to be forgotten. Art history often manages to recuperate artists who have sought, in vain, to subtract themselves from art, and from art history, in one way or another. Art is forever in its own tenacious grip, and art history endeavors to keep the ex-artist in its tenacious grip of authorization, validation, and legitimation. Art history is not keen on invalidating that which it has already helped to valorize, and so even in the case of an artist who attempts to invalidate his/her own art production, art history will seek to maintain its valorization; or if that fails, just to revalidate it. Even an invalidated work of art – let's say, for example, a counterfeit, or a forgery – is

still an authentic work of art, per se, even if its authorship has not been authenticated. As much as art history needs endless revision, it tends to abhor a crisis in its own authority. And allowing an already validated artist to fall down the rabbit hole of artistic self-negation – self-engineered obscurity – might signal just such a crisis in art history's authority. At the same time, it seems that the artist who engineers his/her own obscurity may stand the best chance of never being forgotten.

What abhors a vacuum (and a crisis in legitimacy) most is the art market, wherein the value of art – itself, based upon agreements or arrangements amongst various kinds of 'experts' and speculators – must continue to grow. Neither the demand for – nor the supply of – quality art can be short-circuited, as this might threaten the viability of art as a financialized asset in a fast globalizing art industry. Stagnation contradicts the ethos of the neo-vanguard. Artists who lack market viability, and who have no institutional support, may not even be considered bona fide artists, because they have not become professionalized as artists. And there have been precious few artists who have walked away from success. The artist who decides to leave a successful career as an artist takes a significant risk, perhaps greater than the original risk of becoming an artist in the first place. And yet, the artist who renounces his/her status as an artist may not be able to renounce his/her future entanglement within the historicization, institutionalization, financialization, curation and mediation of their art. Even renunciation avails itself of recuperation.

Today, even the most revisionist, deconstructed, and unorthodox forms of art history seem to be increasingly supplemented – if not occasionally displaced – by non-traditional mechanisms of art production, reproduction, circulation and validation on social media. Art in the digital post-material condition of its own image circulates to anywhere the Internet and social media are available, which means that art has no hiding places. Neither does the artist. When art is dematerialized as a sign everywhere, it becomes a visual currency that finds another kind of valorization beyond art experts and institutions: the endorsement of online crowds. Art's ubiquitous mediation, its accelerated appearance everywhere, becomes another kind of legitimation. Even if we delete an image in one place, it will show up in another place; on the Internet, nothing is completely deleted, because all data is recoverable. And therefore art is always potentially recoverable. This makes it very difficult for the culturally valorized artist to withdraw from his/her status as an artist, to drop out from art, particularly if that artist's work has entered the circulatory system of the Internet. Because the scenography of art is now everywhere, and every place and non-place a platform for the appearance of work, and the re-appearance of the artist— whether the artist has withdrawn from art, or is merely dead. Nothing keeps disappeared or dead artists alive and present more efficiently than the Internet. If an artist deletes his/her identity as an artist to take on another identity, that former identity is never completely deleted; life-data is always recoverable, we reproduce the conditions of our own surveillance. We are all made of data, anyway. And there may be no credible way to drop out of anything in the

epoch in which our lives are no longer entirely ours, in which algorithms anticipate our social behaviors. The artist who has dropped out of the art world may return as an algorithm, a bot, or an app for all we know. In a sense, the artist – and the artist's work – is always being cloned on the Internet. The absent artist is always a present artist in cyberculture, just as the work of art is always here amongst us as its own infinitely reproducible afterimage. And we already know that there is nothing more real than a simulation that endlessly haunts us as a reasonable substitute, for reproduction and simulation displace art – and, in a sense, the artist – into the non-place of every place, everywhere. Even disappearance is a form of appearance on the networks. In/on social media, artists tend to lose control of the images of their own art. This is not only about questions of copyright, copyleft, the creative commons, sharing etc. It's about what happens to images of art when they are sent out without entirely known or predetermined destinations and receptions: there is a loss of control, in varying degrees. Artists like a loss of control only if they can control that loss of control, and when the artist leaves art and the art worlds, it's the final real-symbolic public gesture of reasserting control over their art (and life). The work of art continues circulating endlessly, yet the former-artist or disappeared-artist is a mere artifact of the afterimage of the work of art. There is no exit in a world in which exits are portals to other worlds.

Artists have traditionally managed the loss of control of the image of their art through rights & reproduction agreements and fees, but things do escape this control system. On the Internet, traditional legal mechanisms of control are difficult to maintain, particularly when the definition of fair usage is constantly being stretched. The advent of digitization and the Internet radically scales up these processes, rapidly increases proliferation, and further mediates the work of art into millions of its own reproductions which are then repurposed by endless recipients or 'users.' Social media, in theory and often in principle, allows for the endless re-use of art by users. In the professionalized disciplinary realms of art, social media's regime of unregulated image dissemination and reproduction can be as unsettling as it is potentially liberating. The uncertainty of the life of the image, as it passes out of any stable contextual frames of definition, threatens the still relatively highly controlled art ecosystem of production/presentation/display/definition – from art schools to alternative spaces to galleries, museums, oral and written histories, rumors and mythologies, art fairs, biennials, auctions and other platforms of production, circulation, exchange, consumption, etc. Wherever there are various kinds of markets that underpin ecosystems (and wherever there are not), the tension between consensus and dissensus about what constitutes art tends to lead to some kind of consensus, or else the ecosystem falls apart. And once something has been defined, codified and validated as art, it seems that nothing can change this status. It's easy to make value judgments about whether this or that artwork is good, bad, mediocre, or whatever; but to reverse engineer that which is art, per se, back to that which is not art, per se, seems a fool's errand. Even a destroyed work of art is still a (destroyed) work of art. A case in point: Robert Morris, an artist who never dropped out of art, made what might be characterized as a meta-artwork about another artwork that

he had invalidated aesthetically. In 1963, Morris produced a work entitled *Litanies*, a lead and mixed media object composed of 27 keys inscribed with words from Marcel Duchamp texts, with a lock. Morris sold the piece to the architect Philip Johnson, who was very late in paying him. In response, Morris produced *Document*, a work composed of a schematic rendering of *Litanies* on a lead sheet (referred to as "Exhibit A"), and an officially notarized, signed text document with information on the transaction with Johnson, and a stipulation negating the "aesthetic quality and content of the original work." Johnson then purchased *Document*, apparently accepting the artist's repudiation of *Litanies*. This left Johnson in possession of one aesthetically valid work (*Document*), and one aesthetically invalidated work (*Litanies*); Morris cannily never stipulated that the aesthetically invalidated artwork be materially destroyed. Eventually, Johnson gifted both works to MoMA. Therefore, even though Morris negated the aesthetic value of *Litanies*, its intrinsic status as a work of art – which we might consider to be distinct from its aesthetic value – appears to have remained intact: *Litanies* is an artwork re-valored through its placement in the museum's collection by a patron. Furthermore, in the transaction between patron and museum, the aesthetically invalidated artwork was perhaps aesthetically revalidated. Art cannot be un-arted.

A reproduction of a work of art may not be the original work of art, per se, and photography and digital media complicate matters, but the reproduction (or post-reproduction) nevertheless carries with it and redistributes the trace of the work of art. There is also the more vexing question of what exactly constitutes 'art' on social media, and who is in control of making these determinations and discriminations. Is it still only artists? Collectors? Art historians? Gallerists? Curators? Or is it increasingly the great multitude of online users who receive and possibly repurpose any image as a potential work of art? Is the definition of what art is now a matter of crowd-sourced opinions? Statistics? On social media, something that is not quite art but might be misunderstood as art has the possibility of becoming art.

It seems that the definition and status of art – and artist – are under significant pressure from social media. By this I mean that people who do not necessarily self-identify as artists post images on social media that are sometimes received by others as art – perhaps as accidental, or incidental art. Yet those same people might subsequently begin to self-identify as artists, even if they have no formal art training. On social media, on the Internet, perhaps everyone has the opportunity to be an artist. Which is another reason why it is so difficult for artists to cease being artists; on the other hand, if everyone becomes an artist, perhaps there is no longer a need to disappear from art. So is it even possible to disappear from the scene when increasingly everything is archived on the Internet, and mediated through social media? Disappearing from the scene of art, or withdrawing as an artist, used to be so much easier. If I walked away from being a writer, curator and educator, in the midst of writing this very text, there would still be nearly 40,000 results for me on Google search. How does one disappear from that? (Marina Abramovic, by the way, has approximately 870,000 results on Google search.) But of course there's a

vast difference between being visible as an artist on social media and being financially viable as an artist; these can be very different forms of cultural capital. It's not clear whether Internet-visibility necessarily translates into the kind of capital that one needs to buy food, yet there is an immense pressure for artists to be visible in some way, particularly given the alternative: the purgatory of invisibility. Of course, if one is invisible as an artist, if one never appeared on the scene as an artist, if one has gone public as an artist but has no public support, one may already be a post-artist before having ever being an artist, per se. The artist may have more 'platforms' and more 'economic scales' to play with today than at any other time, none of which necessarily translates into an economically sustainable career as an artist.

If the artist destroys him or herself as an artist, the person survives, as does the data-trace of the person's former life as an artist. That data-trace is the aftereffect of art. The desire to leave the field of contemporary art after having been valorized by that field is difficult to actualize. It goes without saying that in the United States, at least, the only way to retire from a profession (even though art is considered to be at once more and less than a 'profession'), and to ensure a decent quality of life during retirement is to have accumulated a sufficient amount of capital. Since the artist's capital is art, or art-derived activities such as teaching, it's tough to walk away from this art capital. Although art has long participated in various modes of economic exchange and transaction, its role today in global markets as a financialized instrument of speculative capital, with increasing returns on investment, may portend the scaling-up of art to unforeseen industrial levels. If so, the artist is no longer merely an artist, but also a cultural entrepreneur: a manager of – and stakeholder in – the industrialization of their own art. Statistically, the percentage of market-successful artists is still rather small in relation to the actual number of self-defined artists in the world, but dreams of success have seduced many. The incentives for artists to participate as speculators, so to speak, in their own art careers, may be reaching a fever pitch in this epoch of hyper-professionalization and hyper-financialization. Already, it seems requisite for artists to be Instagrammed standing in front of their art works at art fairs, since Instagram is a primary platform for artists to produce & reproduce their art for endless recirculation amongst a widening range of 'followers'; it's also a network used by curators, collectors, writers, gallerists, and academics not only for research and the neutral sharing of information, but also for acts of artistic and cultural valorization. Do artists actually exist if we can't see them on the Internet and social media? Can a Tweet be an artwork too? Even as artists seek to generate ubiquitous visibility on social media to gain acknowledgement from us – the 24/7 audience – that they actually exist as artists, such visibility does not guarantee material success, and may inadvertently produce economic precariousness. And so a certain kind of visibility may actually lead to another sort of invisibility, even though there are many different ways to be an artist – multiple platforms, and various economic scales; a part-time artist is still an artist, even if this is looked on with suspicion by some. But artists who are financially and institutionally successful as artists rarely seem to leave – or 'retire' from – art. The successful artist can go on being an

artist forever, so why unplug? The unsuccessful artist can also go on forever being an (unsuccessful) artist, but this can be a humiliating and alienating condition of life, and perhaps reason enough to unplug from art. Yet, as we've seen, a final disconnection may not even be possible.

The afterlife, so to speak, of the post-artist – i.e., the artist who has renounced his/her status as an artist – is nevertheless maintained by the endless 'life' of the work of art. This is even more so the case in the age of digital production, postproduction, reproduction, and post-reproduction, wherein everything that enters the Internet becomes part of the seemingly limitless inventory of everything that is (on) the Internet.

Art produces the aftereffect of the artist.

Art is the spectral presence of the absent artist.

Art is the document of itself, and of the artist.

If the artist walks away from being an artist, history will catch up.

Art defies the artist who has refuted art.

Art refutes the disappearance of the artist.

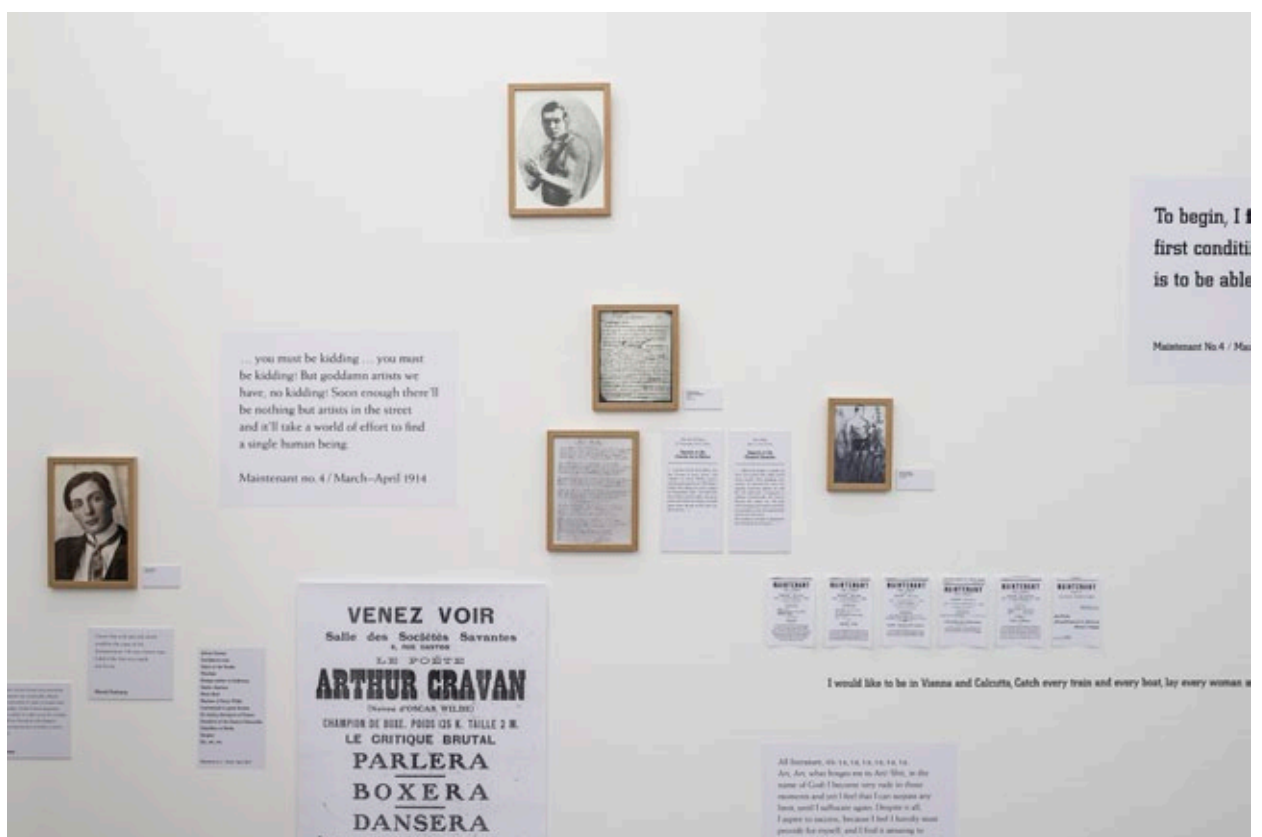
Leave art, get lost, if you want to be remembered as an artist.

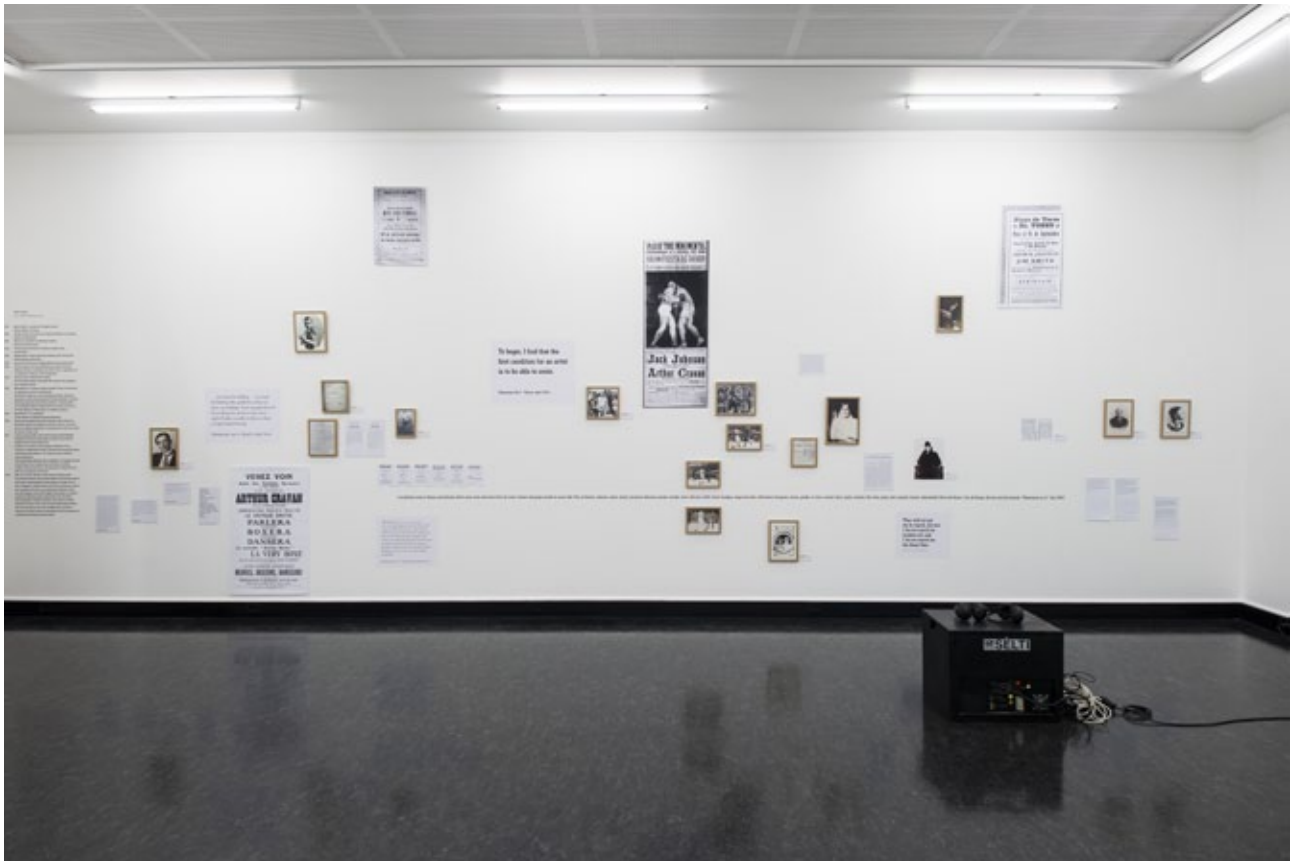
If I decide to leave the field of art one day, this text will be the residue of the writer, curator, art historian and theorist that I once was, and still am: here, where I am not.

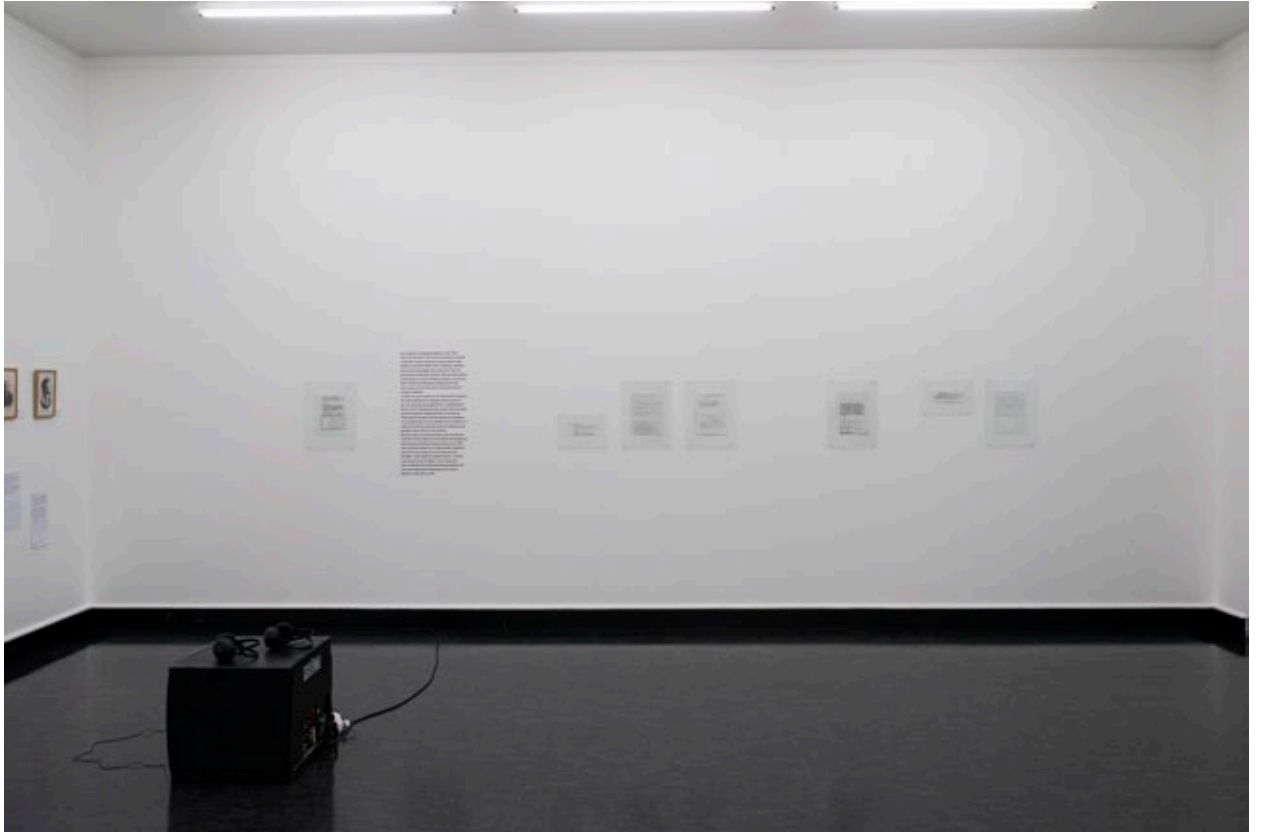
No (art) exit?

No (artist) exit?

Joshua Decter is a New York-based writer, curator, art historian, and theorist who has contributed to Artforum, Afterall, Mousse, The Exhibitionist and other international periodicals. He has curated exhibitions at PS1 (now MoMA PS1), The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Apex Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, The Kunsthalle Vienna, the Santa Monica Museum of Art, and other institutions. Decter is the author of Art Is a Problem: Selected Criticism, Essays, Interviews and Curatorial Projects (1986-2012), published by JRP|Ringier in 2013, and co-author of Exhibition as Social Intervention: 'Culture in Action' 1993, published by Afterall in 2014. He is a faculty member at the School of Visual Art's M.A. Curatorial Practice program, and also teaches at Cooper Union.









GESTURES OF DISAPPEARANCE

28 MAY – 16 AUGUST
NO.5

Arthur Cravan, Bas Jan Ader, Chris Burden, Lee Lozano.

Curated by Alexander Koch.

Gestures of Disappearance was first shown in 2002 at the Gallery of the Art Academy in Leipzig, Germany, under the full title *Kunst Verlassen 1 — Gestures of Disappearance*.

The exhibition brought together, for the first time, four seminal artists, each of whom disappeared from the art world in different ways and for different reasons.

The exhibition gives a comprehensive overview of the life and work of the little known but influential pre-Dadaist poet, critic and rabble-rouser, Arthur Cravan, as well as post-war American based artists Bas Jan Ader, Chris Burden and Lee Lozano. As the title “*Gestures of Disappearance*” suggests, the exhibition focuses on the ostentatious, performative and, for some, inescapable aspects of artistic withdrawal.

When each of the artists’ scepticism about the social and political capacities of art reached its climax, their doubts in their own role as an artist became visible in both artworks and symbolic gestures. These gestures negotiated the individual possibilities within a societal framework that all four criticised, sometimes drastically, with sharp insight and little will to compromise.

Lozano and Cravan left the art world for good. Burden did not. Ader died during his last project, an attempt to cross the Atlantic from Cape Cod in his one-man yacht. The melancholic and existentialistic tone of the exhibition makes tangible the artists’ struggles with their identities and future perspectives. It points to an artistic model or myth of the artist rooted in romanticism, a position which had become ever more fragile, irrelevant and inadequate.

In NO.5 Bergen Kunsthall revisits selected artworks and exhibitions, previously presented elsewhere in the world. Initiated in response to the increasing acceleration of both the production and reception of art, NO.5 provides an opportunity to slow down, focus on, and look again at particular works, exhibitions or fragments of exhibitions. Bergen Kunsthall will commission a new critical text to accompany each of these re-presentations.

RELATED EVENTS

PLATTFORM

16 June, 7pm

A talk with Joshua Decter and screening of the film *Cravan vs. Cravan* by Isaki Laquesta

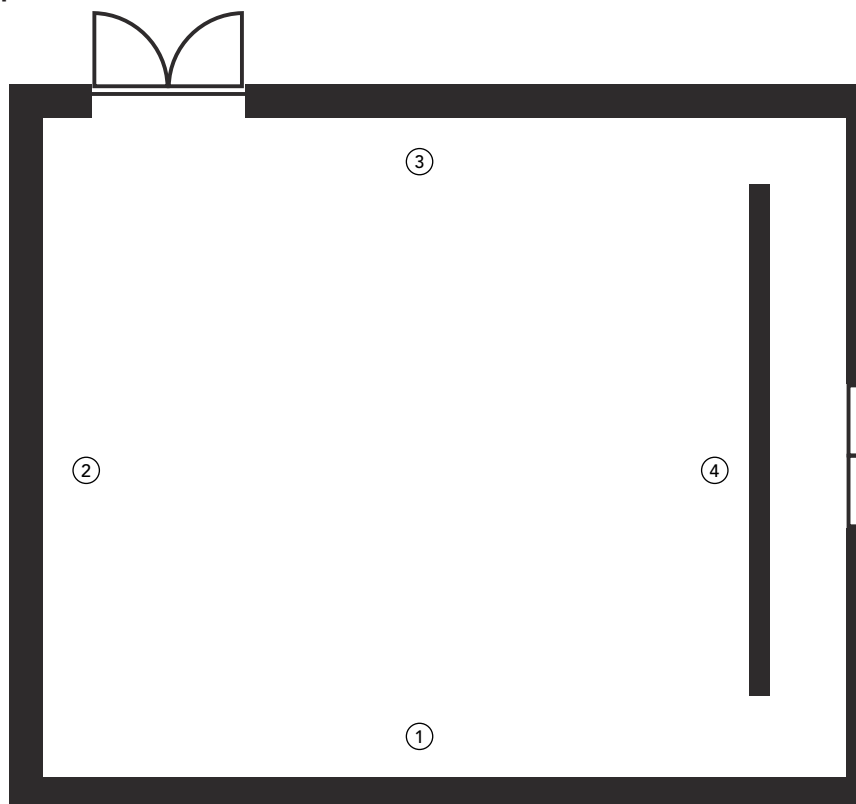
GUIDED TOURS

Every Sunday, 2pm

27 May, 5pm Members

31 May, 1pm Families

**Exhibition Map
No.5**



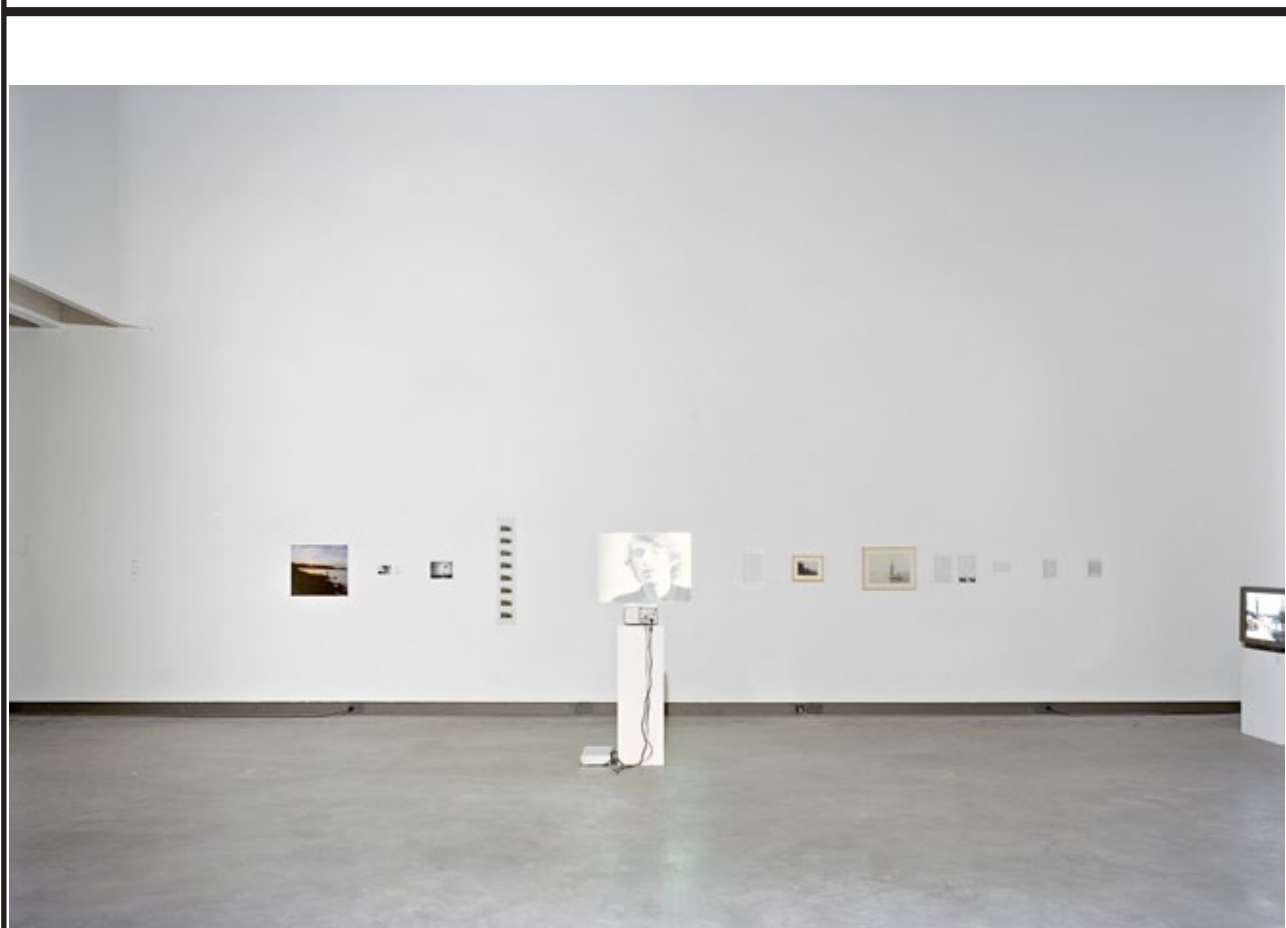
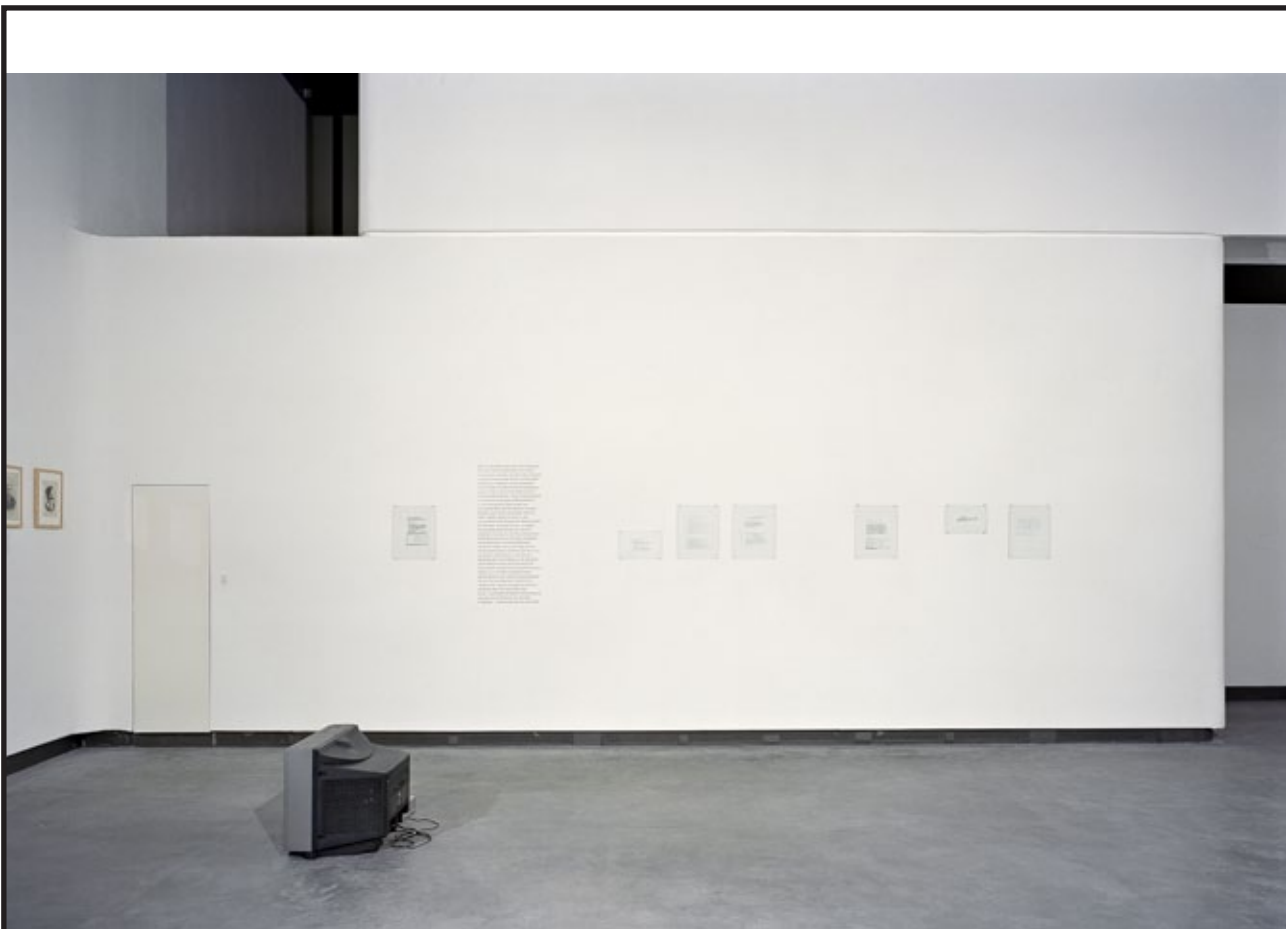
- 1 Arthur Cravan (*1887, †1918 ?)
- 2 Lee Lozano (*1930, †1999)
- 3 Bas Jan Ader (*1942, †1975 ?)
- 4 Chris Burden (*1946, †2015)



Facsimile from installation photos, 2002



Facsimile from installation photos, 2002



Facsimile from installation photos, 2002

ENTREE

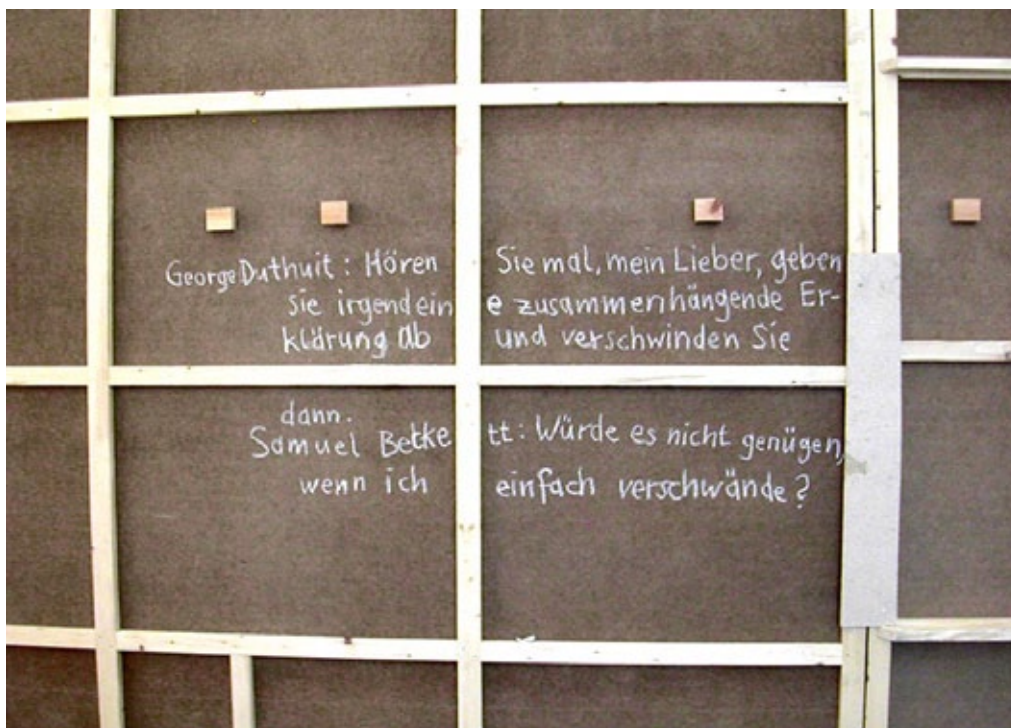
ENTREE

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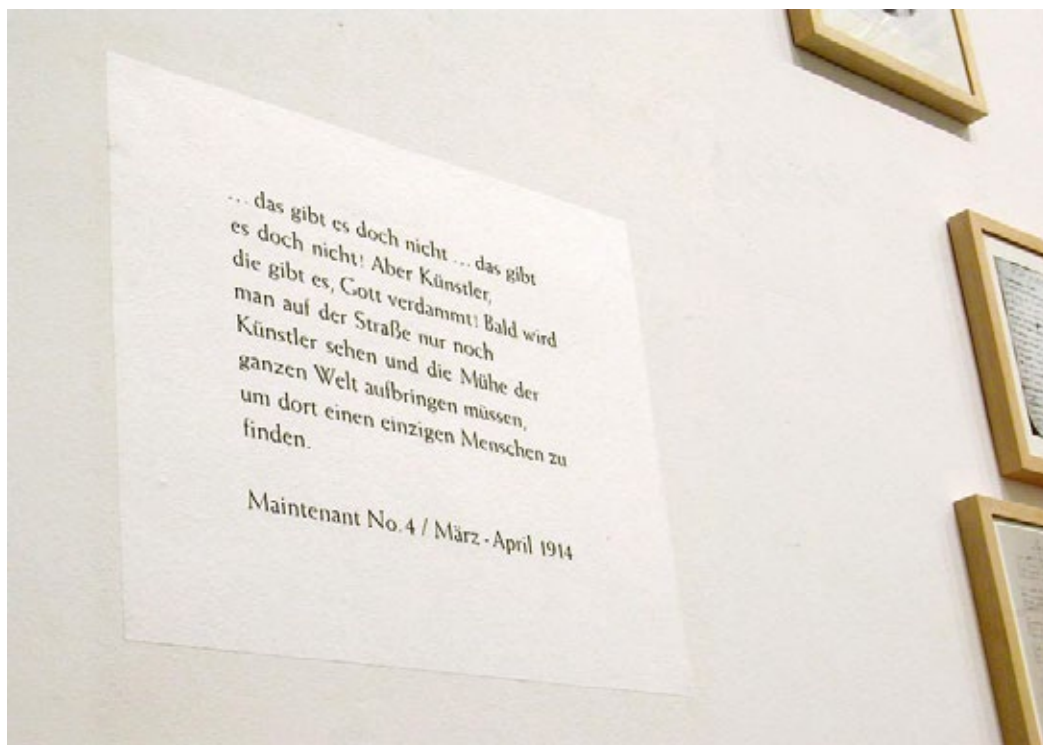
WALL CONSTRUCTION



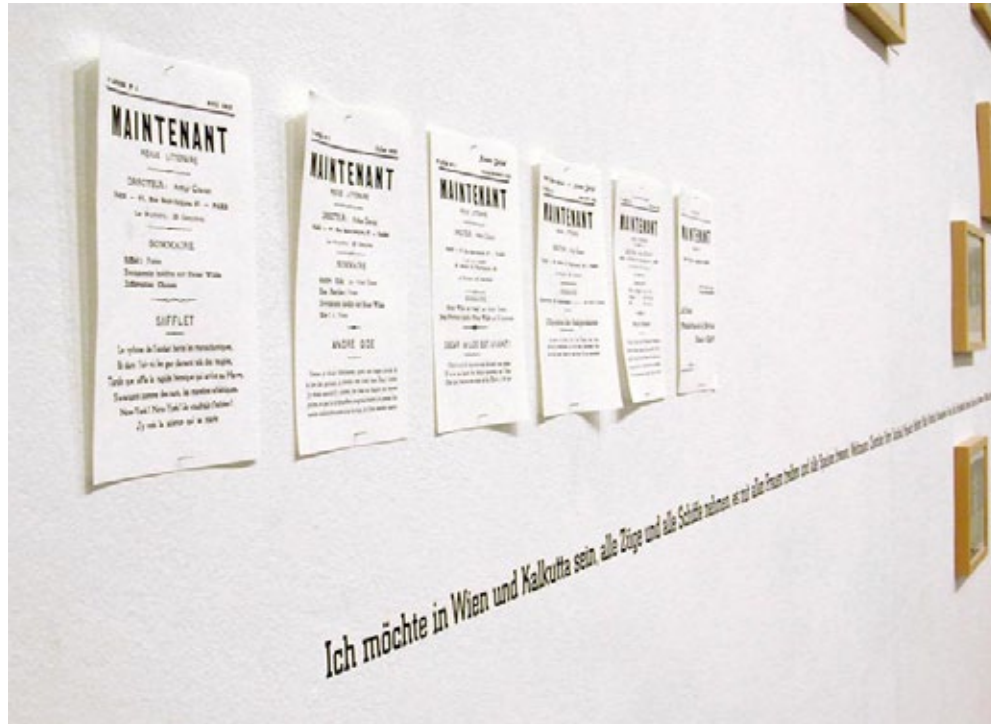
GEORGE DUTHUIT: INTERVIEW WITH SAMUEL BECKETT

ARTHUR CRAVAN

➔ PERFORMANCE AND WRITING / PARIS 1908 – 1915



➡ **WRITING / PARIS 1912 – 1915**



Finestra Isolata

1922 - 1923

MAINTENANT

NOUVE LITTÉRAIRE

DIRECTEUR: Arthur Guez

PARIS: 10, rue de Valenciennes - 10 - PARIS
En face de la gare
10, boulevard de Valenciennes, 10
Les Miroirs - 10 - Valenciennes

SOMMAIRE

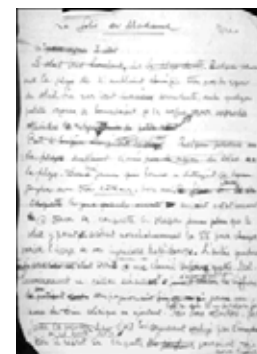
Deux Vies et deux poèmes de Arthur Guez
Deux Portraits inédits d'Henri Wille et de L. Lacombe

OSCAR WILDE EST VIVANT!

C'est la seule édition avec des notes sur l'auteur.
Et c'est une œuvre des plus originales que l'on ait
lue sur l'auteur et ses œuvres.



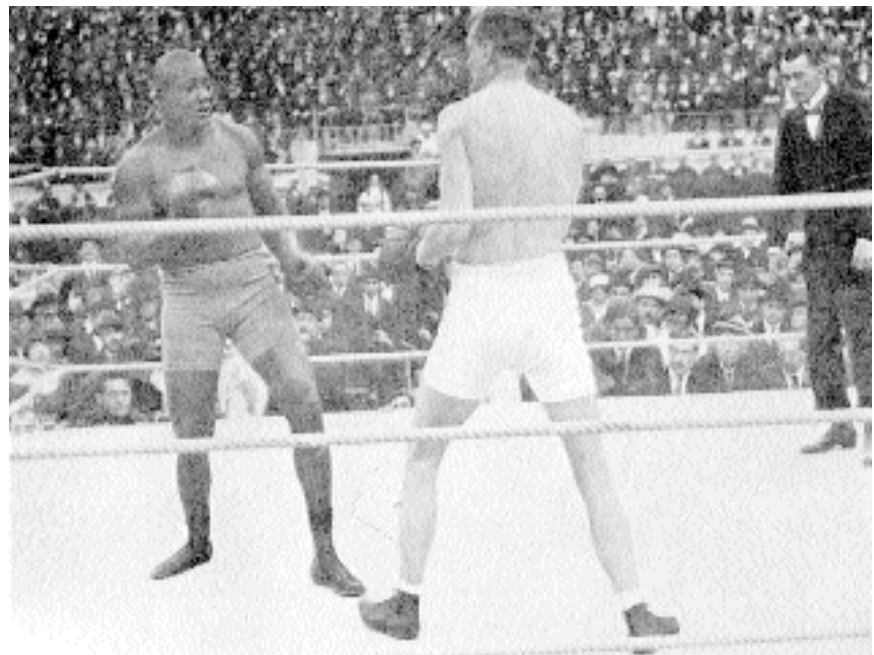
COPY



MANUSCRIPT

Facsimile from production manual

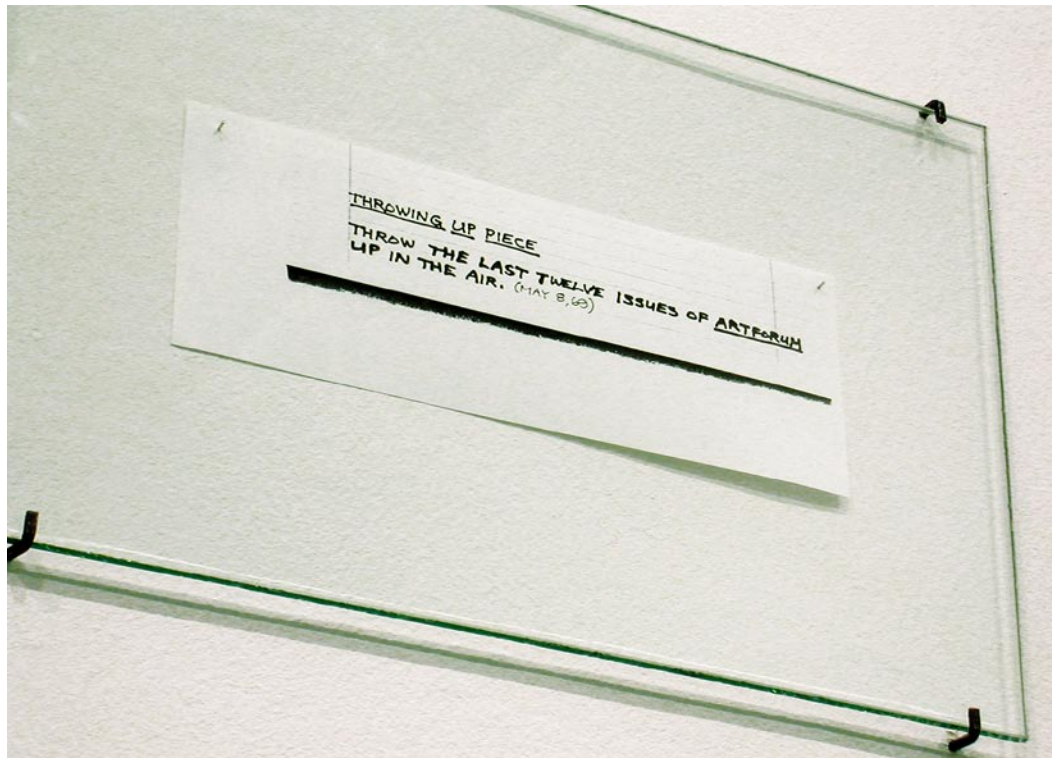
ARTHUR CRAVAN ➡ BOXING / BARCELONA 1916



„THE BIG FIGHT“: ARTHUR CRAVAN VS. JACK JOHNSON / POSTER, PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARTICLE



LEE LOZANO
 ➡ LANGUAGE PIECES / NEW YORK 1969



APRIL 10, 69

STATEMENT FOR OPEN PUBLIC HEARING,
 ART WORKERS COALITION.

FOR ME THERE CAN BE NO ART REVOLUTION
 THAT IS SEPARATE FROM A SCIENCE
 REVOLUTION, A POLITICAL REVOLUTION, AN
 EDUCATION REVOLUTION, A DRUG REVOLUTION,
 A SEX REVOLUTION OR A PERSONAL REVOLUTION.
 I CANNOT CONSIDER A PROGRAM OF MUSEUM
 REFORMS WITHOUT EQUAL ATTENTION TO
 GALLERY REFORMS AND ART MAGAZINE REFORMS
 WHICH WOULD AIM TO ELIMINATE STABLES OF
 ARTISTS AND WRITERS. I WILL NOT CALL
 MYSELF AN ART WORKER BUT RATHER AN
 ART DREAMER AND I WILL PARTICIPATE ONLY
 IN A TOTAL REVOLUTION SIMULTANEOUSLY PERSONAL
 AND PUBLIC.

LEE LOZANO
 60 GRAND ST., N.Y.C.

MASTURBATION PIECE - (STARTED AT ART SAME TIME AS GRASS PIECE
 AND GENERAL STRIKE PIECE; "PETERED OUT
 WITHIN APPROX. 10-DAY PERIOD).
 (DESCRIBE VERBALLY, AT DISCRETION).

GENERAL STRIKE PIECE - (STARTED "OFFICIALLY" DAY AFTER
 READING OF STATEMENT AT OPEN
 HEARING; PARTS BEGUN WITHIN A
 PREVIOUS ~~2~~ 2-MONTH PERIOD).
 DESCRIBE VERBALLY.

BOOK-OF-CHANGE PIECE - (STARTED IN 1965; "OFFICIALLY" STARTED ~~APRIL 1969~~
 APRIL 1969)

WAY OUT PIECE - (CONCEIVED MAY 6, 69) [CONT. NEXT PAGE]

(QUOTE): IT WAS A CONGENIAL MEETING & WAS ONLY OCCASIONALLY BROKEN
 BY SMALL PARTS - SCREEN, THE WEEKLY SEX REVIEW.

DIALOGUE PIECE (STARTED APRIL 21, 69)

'CALL, WRITE OR SPEAK TO PEOPLE & YOU MIGHT
 NOT OTHERWISE SEE FOR THE SPECIFIC PURPOSE
 OF INVITING THEM TO ^{YOUR} LOFT FOR A DIALOGUE.'

IN PROCESS PERPETUALLY FROM DATE OF FIRST
 CALL (APRIL 21, 69). DATE OF FIRST INTEREST IN
 DIALOGUES - 1948. DATE OF DECISION TO PURSUE
 INVESTIGATION OF DIALOGUES - APRIL 8, 69.0

NOTE: THE PURPOSE OF THIS PIECE IS TO HAVE
 DIALOGUES, NOT TO MAKE A PIECE. NO RECORDING
 OR NOTES ARE MADE DURING DIALOGUES, WHICH
 EXIST SOLELY FOR THEIR OWN SAKE AS JOYOUS
 SOCIAL OCCASIONS.0

* HOWEVER, I KEPT A RECORD OF DIALOGUES & MADE A FEW NOTES AFTERWARDS. (CARBON COPY)

1. DATE OF A FORMALLY ARRANGED DIALOGUE WITH CARL ANDRE FOR ANTON REISCHNE -
 STORY TO BE TOLD VERBALLY: A DISASTER!

2. THE DEFINITION OF "PEOPLE" REMAINS OPEN. "PERFECT STRANGERS,"
 AN ANIMAL, AN INFANT WILL BE INCLUDED.

1. DUE TO GENERAL STRIKE PIECE, WHICH SEE(S).

2. DEFINITION OF "DIALOGUE" REMAINS OPEN. "VERBALLY" IS PERTINENT.

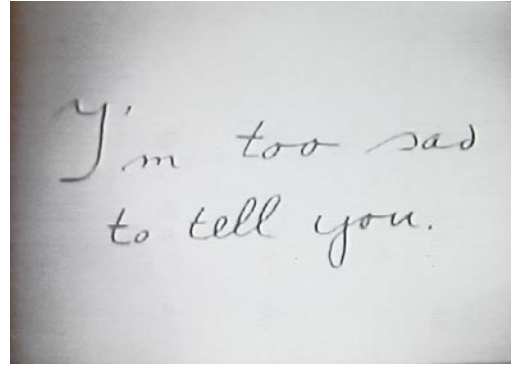
3. DATE OF FIRST DIALOGUE - MAY 17, 69. NUMBER OF DIALOGUES ENJOYED
 TO CURRENT DATE - (13). THIS NUMBER INCREASED TO APPROX. 150 BY JULY 1969. THIS IS A
 PRE-CONCEIVED WHEN I "OFFICIALLY" RATED THE PIECE BY DEPRIVING ALL THE PREVIOUS
 INFORMATION BATHS PIECE & PIES-ON-ALL-YR-IDEAS PIECE.

4. TEN DIALOGUES TURNED OUT TO BE JOYOUS, OR EVEN SOCIAL. SOME WERE BULL, SOME
 WERE NIGHTMARES OF TENSION OR DISCOMFORT. I RETURN TO DISCUSS SETTING UP A DAY
 & OFTEN WOULD GET HEADACHES DURING OR AFTER ONE. SOME PEOPLE WERE UNABLE
 PARTICIPATE. NATURALLY I AM STILL SUPREMACY INTERESTED IN DIALOGUE (AS OPPOSED
 FOR EXAMPLE, TO MONOLOGUE) & AM PLEASED TO SEE THE IDEA BEING INVESTIGATED.

LEE LOZANO, JUNE 12, 69.

BAS JAN ADER

➡ **TOO SAD TO TELL YOU / FALL PIECES / 1970**



I'M TOO SAD TO TELL YOU, 1970 / 16 MM B/W FILM, 50 SEC (VIDEO COPY)



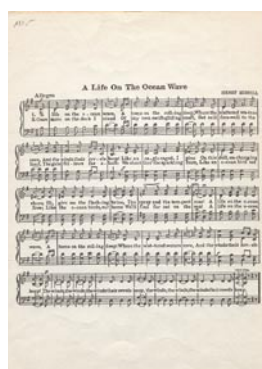
FALL II, 1970 / 16 MM B/W FILM, 14 SEC (VIDEO COPY)

Facsimile from production manual

BAS JAN ADER
↻ DISAPPEARANCE / 1975



BULLETIN 89, 1975 / ART & PROJECT AMSTERDAM / INSIDE, FRONT AND BACK



INTERVIEW WITH MARY SUE ADER (REPRO)

Facsimile from production manual

➔ **THREE PERFORMANCES / 1971/73**

[illegible]

Facsimile from production manual

CHRIS BURDEN

➡ THREE PERFORMANCES / 1971/73

Disappearing
December 22-24, 1971

I disappeared for three days without prior notice to anyone.
On these three days my whereabouts were unknown.

B.C. Mexico
Newspace: May 25-June 10, 1973

I was dropped off in San Felipe, Mexico, on the Sea of Cortez. In a small canvas kayak I paddled southward to a remote beach, carrying some water with me. I survived there for 11 days; the average daily temperature was 120 degrees. On June 7, I paddled back to San Felipe and was driven to Los Angeles. The piece had been announced as a show by Newspace, and during my stay in Mexico a notice in the gallery informed visitors of my absence. On June 10 at Newspace, I showed a short movie of my departure and read a diary I had kept.

GENERAL STRIKE

BY ALEXANDER KOCH

General Strike

Opting out of art, a theoretical foundation

Alexander Koch
2002-2011

The interest in artists who have turned their backs on art and abandoned their practices is a relatively recent phenomenon. When I conceived an exhibition about Gestures of Disappearance¹ in 2002 that featured work by Lee Lozano, Arthur Cravan, and others, most of my theoretical and historical research came up empty. I found biographical material about individual artists, but no discussions of movements of retreat from art that showed any systematic ambition. In the history of art, it seemed, the chapter about dropping out was yet to be written. So I needed to lay the theoretical and historiographical foundations for “dropping out of art” as a thematic issue. In the following I will resume arguments I have presented in several texts² written between 2005 and 2008 in order to define the concept more precisely and derive consequences that may also serve as parameters for further studies.

In recent years, renewed attention to the oeuvres of artists who resigned from the field of art—Lee Lozano and Charlotte Posenenske would appear to be paradigmatic examples—has raised interest in the topic and brought it some popularity. The contemporary art scene has a penchant for reevaluating artists’ positions, particularly from the 1960s and 1970s, that had were marginalized or forgotten, and using the (alleged) radicalism of such positions to furnish itself with an ersatz sense of urgency the scene may often lack today. This tendency threatens to generate new myths of artistic dissidence. They must be deconstructed before becoming entrenched. A closer look and a more nuanced perspective seems desirable in particular where people speak, with increasing frequency, of “dropping out of art” as a form of resistance to the market and the institutions. Such resistance is by no means present even in all instances to which the concept of dropping out in the narrow sense applies. At the same time, we need to understand wherein such dropping out strictly conceived consists, and determine the potential for (systemic) critique it may have in the perspective of the field of art.

Another reason why we should clarify the concept can be found in recent debates—motivated in part by academic interests, in part by political concerns—over (artistic) forms of idleness. They are fruitful for our understanding of what it means to drop out of art because they can illuminate how not only action but also inaction is a performance that contributes to shaping social reality, and show how such inaction, too, is a form—perhaps a critical form—of praxis.

TERMINOLOGY

I use the term dropping out of art to describe, generally, the social translocation and, more specifically, the social practice of an actor whom we can localize in the field of art at a point in time X but not at a later point in time Y, and who wanted this to be the case.

This definition has several implications:

I follow Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social fields in speaking of actors in the field of art, rather than artists. Otherwise we would need to decide who can legitimately be considered an artist and who cannot. But such membership—as distinct from the private claim to the status of artist, which the social environment may refuse to acknowledge—is determined by a process of recognition that takes place in the field of art itself, and so I assume that someone who “drops out of art” must have been a player in the art world in the first place, or it would be meaningless to speak of dropping out. No one can surrender an artistic position who does not hold one to begin with. Someone who buries his artistic ambitions due to a lack of social or institutional recognition or financial success does not truly do so of his own accord—and that is what the concept of dropping out presupposes. It implies that someone acts intentionally (I can disregard the niceties of the concept of intentionality in this context).

That also distinguishes the concept from scenarios of censorship and the repression of artistic practices. For in such instances we would speak not of someone’s dropping out but, to put it bluntly, of someone’s being kicked out. It might be objected that this perspective immediately excludes unrecognized positions that have been marginalized from the outset. But this objection would either raise the question regarding the social criteria governing the recognition of someone’s being an artist, or bring us to artistic practices located beyond officially sanctioned conceptions of art and the artist, practices whose criteria of inclusion and exclusion we cannot determine in general terms at this point. By presupposing the position of an observer, the decision to adopt a sociological system to describe social practices deliberately avoids adopting an underlying ideological or idealistic concept of art to which the concept of dropping out would then need to relate more specifically.

A second and important implication of the definition given above is that the general designation “actor in the field of art” includes not only artists, but also curators, critics, gallerists, collectors, even professors at universities and

academies—generally speaking, anyone who is a member of the field of art and accordingly also capable of leaving that field. My argument is based on the assumption that practices within the field of art are fairly—and increasingly—mutually permeable. It would be melodramatic and, once again, an instance of ideological tunnel vision to call the move from an artistic to a curatorial practice an instance of “dropping out of art,” a move that is in reality a change of practices and roles within the field of art and, we should note, easily reversible; more so at a time when a growing number of artists simultaneously or occasionally play the role of curator. The fact that switching from curating to making art is (still) virtually impossible and perhaps even taboo is a different matter.

By contrast, the fact that artists also work as critics, gallerists, and professors, devoting more or less energy to this work and in some instances focusing entirely on teaching or writing, is hardly surprising if we consider that artists for a long time also played the role of art historians before art history was founded as an academic discipline in its own right. And if many gallerists were conversely artists at some point, that past identifies them as longtime art enthusiasts and not as refugees from art or even artphobes. In the interest of conceptual clarity, I will in the following nonetheless largely constrain myself to portraying artists as art dropouts.

My definition has another implication, one that is sobering to historians: that art dropouts leave nothing behind in the field of art beyond monuments to their practice from the time before they dropped out as well as one or the other fact or rumor about where they have gone. That creates unfavorable conditions for observing them. The historian always arrives too late to meet them. Indicatively enough, they also tend not to give retrospective interviews, which would once again make them players of a sort in the field. In many instances, the oeuvre or their notes already contain hints as to the motives of their withdrawal. Describing the act itself and especially its goal more precisely would require an eyewitness, as it were. On occasion, fellow artists, curators, and gallerists offer such observations, and their reports are in most cases the only informative sources, although they are often colored by their personal views. The only way to document an instance of dropping out, then, is by tracing its dialectical relation to a past practice that no longer exists and that does not constitute the real heart of the matter. For the same reasons, the withdrawal itself cannot be exhibited.

Two special cases require discussion: the voluntary withdrawal from art in repressive systems, and suicide.

The question of dropping out appears more complicated with regard to the particular cultural-political situation in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe.³ Not only did these countries have two fields of art—an official one, regulated by public authorities, and an unofficial and highly informal one—that were intertwined in subtle ways, so that we would have to examine the motivations and consequences of dropping out with respect to each individually. But there is also the question of how many

actors may under these conditions have failed to gain access to one or the other field of art, renouncing the wish to pursue an artistic practice early on. An attempt to write the history of dropping out of art under repressive regimes faces the additional challenge that it would redouble the invisibility of practices already repressed by the system, given its own inevitable inability to document such practices.

Commentators often conflate suicide with the withdrawal from art. In isolated cases such as that of Ray Johnson, who suffered from AIDS when he killed himself, or that of Bas Jan Ader, an experienced yachtsman who must have been aware of the scant likelihood that his attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean in a boat measuring less than thirteen feet in length would be successful, a last work that seems to bespeak desperation or depression may also look like a farewell song to art; to my mind, however, such works are farewell songs to life.

Practices of dropping out: Three forms of artistic inaction

To further clarify the phenomenon of the discontinuation of artistic practices, it is helpful to change the terminology slightly. In recent years, theories of performance and theatricality have taught us a great deal about how human inaction is, or can be, a form of praxis no less valid than action. The idea is immediately plausible if we consider how much gestures of silence employed at the right moment can mean and achieve in art, and not only in art.

In the following, I will distinguish between three forms of artistic inaction. Only the third, I will argue, amounts to a withdrawal from art, while the first two do not.⁴

Ostentatious inaction

What, we may ask, has had greater significance for the evolution of art over the past one hundred years: additions or omissions? Inventing new and promising forms of activity, or shedding old habits that stood in the way of adapting the concept of art to a new era? The act of creation, it seems, is the privileged element in art and regarded as superior to all other related practices. And yet artists, and members of the classical avant-gardes and the post-avant-gardes in particular, more than anyone else, cultivated forms of inaction; of the omission or nonperformance of actions. In fact, the cancellation of elements of their praxis was central to the victory of the idea of autonomy in art. For whenever audiences were given nothing or little rather than something to see—because artists defied the expectations of productivity they faced and cut back on, or suspended, their artistic creation—this defiance asserted their claim to freedom of artistic action no less emblematically than the presentation of new feats of inventiveness. Omitting, effacing, and erasing became characteristic of formal-aesthetic innovation in the production of works, and have long been an integral part of the toolbox of artistic methodology.

Silence and refusal have a voice in the rhetoric of artistic renewal. Like the ugly, the shocking, and the scandalous, artistic inaction can serve as an instrument of innovation by disrupting artistic communication. Such disruptions are particularly prevalent during times of cultural transformation. The waning of artistic modernism during the 1950s and 1960s, to mention a familiar example, was reflected in a historically unprecedented flood of empty canvases, forms of silence, and rejections of traditional models of practice.

Such artistic gestures of silence and acts of refusal, however, have generally drawn attention and become the subject of debates only when they appeared in public and bore features that could ultimately be made suitable to a place in the archives of the museum—when, that is to say, they were ostentatious disruptions of norms and standards of the production, presentation, or distribution of art, demonstrative acts that in turn took the form of works or performances or manifested themselves in documents of some importance. Classical examples include the 1952 performance of John Cage's 4'33 in Woodstock, N.Y., Yves Klein's Paris exhibition *Le Vide* at Galerie Iris Clert (1958), Daniel Buren's sealing the rooms of Galerie Apollinaire, Milan, with white and green stripes of fabric (1968), Robert Barry's

During the exhibition the gallery will be closed (Amsterdam, Turin, and Los Angeles, 1968), Chris Burden's performance *Disappearing* (1971) and his *B.C. Mexico Project* (1973). We could list many more examples.

They illustrate that we become cognizant of the omission or nonperformance of an action against the backdrop of an established set of expectations. Without the habitual or normative expectation that certain actions will be performed, it makes no sense to speak of their failure to take place. If artistic inaction makes a difference vis-à-vis artistic action, it does so only to the extent that it subverts the de facto horizon of expectations that implicitly (for instance, due to an institutional framework) or explicitly (for instance, due to an announcement or a claim) govern the perception of a work or situation. What can, and what cannot, appear and matter as an omission with regard to artistic practices is thus dependent on what is considered an expectable and likely performance of a practice in any particular instance. I use the phrase ostentatious artistic inaction to describe the deliberate rejection of technological, social, institutional, or other expectations artistic practices face, when such rejection in turn manifests itself as an artistic act.

Communicative inaction

These—usually work-like—forms of ostentatious inaction contrast with instances in which no artistic act takes place at all. The failure of artistic action to manifest itself can nonetheless attract attention in the field of art and reveal itself to be a negation of artistic activity. Such forms of visible and even public passivity—"Duchamp's silence"—would be a classical example—displace the plane of artistic action from aesthetic practice toward participation in the social construction of the field of art and the communication circulating within it. Whereas ostentatious artistic inaction often negotiates conceptions of the work and the concrete

institutional apparatuses that sustain them, communicative inaction directs attention primarily to how the role of the artist is imagined and addresses the social conditions that frame an existence in the field of art. The failure to perform an artistic act pursues communicative and sometimes critical intentions. It makes itself known, aiming to generate reflective and discursive effects within a scene.

Radical inaction

Richard Rorty presents a point of comparison that is helpful in illustrating the distinction between communicative inaction and radical inaction. In his book *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, which came out in 1998, he distinguished between a reformist left that, he argues, contributed decisively to the shape of public life in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, and a radical left that gained the upper hand starting in the mid-1960s. Whereas the reformist left acted in the political sphere in order to achieve emancipatory projects such as the abolition of racial discrimination, he writes, the radical left withdrew from practical politics into political theory and cultural production, a shift that—thus Rorty's charge—resulted in its de facto depoliticization. Falling for the simplistic notion that the social injustices a political system generates cannot be changed from within that system, the radical left's quest for an ideal (theoretical) form of justice led it to summarily withdraw from the system altogether. Whereas the reformist attitude represents a conception of critique that aims at political participation, the radical attitude spurns the opportunity to participate.

Drawing on Rorty's distinction, we might call communicative inaction "reformist" as well—it remains part of the critical discourse within, and about, the field of art—and contrast it with a radical artistic inaction that does not, or no longer, participate in that discourse. In analogy with the intellectual attitude Rorty describes, radical inaction would amount to dropping out of the system: the nonperformance of any artistic act that pursues no communicative intention and renounces all modes of critical intervention or other participation in the social reproduction of the field of art. In addition to forgoing the form of the work, such inaction also implies the discontinuation of all other forms of publication, performance, or appearance in the field of art. In short: it means dropping out of art. In contradistinction to negative acts in communicative inaction, radical inaction does not aim to elicit a communicative response. It leaves the communication of art to its own devices. Instead of subverting the expectations that undergird artistic practice, it elopes from them. Instead of addressing conceptions of the work and models of the artist's role with the intention of reforming them, it turns its back on the system of art in its entirety.

It is indicative that the history of art is especially rich in examples of such radical inaction during the same era in which Richard Rorty sees the American left shifting from a reformist to a radical attitude: a period that begins in the mid-1960s. Such inaction is not infrequently the consequence of a loss of utopian belief or of the conviction that one's own actions are socially relevant—a collapse, as it were, of the

internal horizon of expectations that can sustain a praxis in the long run. In this sense, radical artistic inaction derives from the expiration of a reformist interest; yet it can also be based on a reflective and critical assessment of the courses of action still available to a particular actor in the field of art. Such a reassessment may reflect on the conditions that frame an artistic practice, on the general cultural and political situation in a society, or more specifically on individual institutional, economic, or social routines that are typical of the field of art; the actor in the field then addresses these routines precisely by no longer accepting them and consequently ceasing to contribute to the field's social reproduction.

Dropping out as a special case of transitory artistic practice

Yet a constellation of practices as complex as the praxis of art rarely expires overnight. The withdrawal from art is in fact often an incremental process in which the decision to drop out slowly takes shape. A threshold situation between participation and withdrawal, between speaking and silence, between action and inaction can give rise to a performative zone of passage, a transitory practice an actor in the field of art uses to gradually disengage from that field. Although such disengagement can also take place abruptly, radical artistic inaction, or dropping out of art, is usually not a simple refusal or sudden silence; rather, it must first create that silence, or overwrite an artistic practice with a non-artistic one in a cascade of disruptions that sometimes allows for a reflection on the individual components of the practice thus disrupted.

Dropping out of art can accordingly appear as an artistic practice in its own right, which may still include ostentatious and communicative acts before eventually putting a stop to these as well. Seen from this perspective, dropping out would be a (temporary) special case of artistic practice, and possibly a critical practice. This practice may be extended after the decision to drop out has been made when other actors in the field of art—gallerists, for instance, or art critics—will not let go and a former artist must repeatedly reassert his or her refusal against the objections of old friends, inevitably intervening in the communication within the field of art. When such rearguard action becomes a permanent state of affairs, we would have to ask whether the motion to drop out has in fact been successful.

And of course dropping out is a decision the former artist can reverse at any time, as numerous examples demonstrate. It is a compliment to the field of art that, despite the many restrictions of which it is capable, it also displays great readiness to integrate a new or old actor when it can connect his or her (re)appearance to its own interests. Yet we ought to be cautious when positions classified as art dropouts now appear on a stage set up for them by—frequently young—curators motivated by the abovementioned penchant for putative members of an old-school resistance. For what looks like dropping out from a distance was sometimes merely a practice running dry that may not have been economically self-sustaining. Such cases can be tragic; but they do not constitute instances of deliberate dropping out, and they are certainly not suitable models

of resistance.

The question remains: what happens to the oeuvre an artist leaves within the field of art, where, to the extent that it continues to be perceived and perhaps circulated, it ensures that his or her name remains part of the conversation? Since the former artist no longer exerts any influence as an actor, his or her estate and legacy are in the hands of others, sometimes with astonishing consequences. Three examples:

Based in Paris, Galerie 1900/2000, which holds numerous documents from the estate of Arthur Cravan, attributes a series of paintings created in 1914 to him that bear the signature "Édouard Archinard." Whether the small pictures, clumsily painted in the post-Impressionist manner, are indeed from the hand of Cravan, a six-foot-six amateur boxer who had until 1914 primarily practiced the arts of causing public scandal and offending the audience, will probably always remain in doubt.

Years after Charlotte Posenenske's death, her oeuvre is experiencing a renaissance, thanks to the public relations efforts in particular of her former collaborator Burkhard Brunn. For several years, works have been newly manufactured in unlimited editions (the artist herself had expressed the wish that editions not be closed), sometimes of materials that did not even exist when the work-concepts and prototypes were created. This production is perfectly compatible with Posenenske's open conception of the work. Still, it was striking to see her sculptures, otherwise usually made of cool metal, remade from oriented strand board, at documenta 10.

By contrast, several recent works signed "Lee Lozano as remembered by Stephen Kaltenbach" are most questionable. Kaltenbach, a onetime friend and lover of the artist, invokes the authority of works he claims to have seen at Lozano's studio, although she never published them, as well as ideas for works the two contrived together around 1970 but never realized. The results are sculptures and installations of dubitable quality that seem hard to square with the artist's conceptual rigor; the Estate of Lee Lozano accordingly refuses to recognize them. In 2010, Kaltenbach even staged Lozano's conceptual work *Throwing Up Piece* (1969) as a performance in Los Angeles; the act was incompatible with the artist's own practice and not authorized by her estate.

Progressive and regressive dropping out

One question I have not yet addressed is this: when artists drop out, when they depart the art world, what is their destination? We can identify two different fundamental motivations and sets of goals, which also entail different qualifications of various instances of dropping out with regard to their critical potential, or perhaps their ability to inspire. I distinguish between the progressive withdrawal, which I will illustrate using Charlotte Posenenske as an example, and the regressive withdrawal, which I believe Lee Lozano exemplifies.

Progressive dropping out

Charlotte Posenenske explained her withdrawal from art with her belief that art was incapable of contributing to solving social problems.⁵ Instead of leaving it at that, the artist switched to sociology. She apparently thought that social research, by meticulously reconstructing and critiquing widely used methods of the determination of value in economic processes based on the division of labor, would be better suited to establish a more democratic and fair organization of labor than making sculptures. The latter were built in such a way that the viewers, working together, could alter and rearrange them, effectively becoming active users.

They, too, thus represent processes based on a division of labor, in conjunction with a direct invitation to participate. But that seems to have been not enough to Posenenske's mind. Whether her scholarly work ultimately brought her closer to realizing her aims is a different matter. The decisive point is that the emancipatory interest in the political organization of society that had already motivated her slight artistic oeuvre continues immediately in another discipline; and even more, the sociological research she undertook with Burkhard Brunn apparently enabled Posenenske to subject even the earlier productive processes involved in her own sculptural creation to a retrospective critical analysis. Her withdrawal from art thus represents an example of how themes an artist first explores through an artistic engagement can transcend that engagement, leading into other fields of practice, perhaps even creating methodological access to such fields in the first place; and that this sort of shift can also open up a new perspective in which the former artist can see the conditions and limitations of her earlier practice more clearly. Posenenske's dropping out of art can thus be described as a liberating step forward, of advantage to herself and the thematic issues to which she was committed.

The field of art boasts of its members who have come from other disciplines. When an artist has studied biology, German philology, or political science, that fact is highlighted (if he or she is a trained baker, not so much), with overtones of the suggestion that this past confers a particular degree of well-foundedness or social relevance on the artist's practice. By contrast, it seems difficult to imagine that the art scene would boast of having lost an actor to biology, German philology, or political science. A case of wounded professional pride that someone would rather lead the ordinary life of a middle-class employee, or embarrassment that someone would prefer the hard sciences? If there were more cases like Posenenske's, a different sort of permeability, different interactions between artistic and non-artistic practices and discourses might be more tangible.

Regressive dropping out

Lee Lozano's withdrawal from art, too, is rich with indications that she no longer thought that art had the social potential she had hoped it would develop.⁹ In her *Language*

Pieces and notebooks, she meticulously examines individual features of the art world she feels a growing revulsion for—first and foremost its vanity. Yet dropping out does not open up new perspectives for her—or for us—but instead leads her into a life of loneliness in difficult financial and personal circumstances. Art-scene insiders find little that is new in the sometimes mercilessly self-revealing notes from the artist's everyday life, but she certainly addresses things openly that some people would never admit to themselves or others. Lozano's themes range from excessive drug use and financial worries to the hope that art might yet bring her a happier life. For art-scene outsiders, her notes limn the portrait of a scene in which incestuous relationships, careerism, and pseudo-revolutionary showmanship are the rule—a picture that is eye-opening and even amusing. Yet despite their persuasive internal logic, the notebooks lack all analytical depth.

Her critical view of the art world did not take Lee Lozano anywhere but out of that world. And if it enabled her to better understand the art world, there is no way for us to observe her gaining such insight. Unfortunately, the same is true of the overwhelming majority of art-world dropouts. Instances in which they act as productive bridgeheads or hubs, creating access to other fields of practice, would seem to be the exception, which is not to say that the people in question may not have led a happier life after dropping out. It may seem harsh to call Lozano's withdrawal regressive. But in the perspective of the field of art—and that is my perspective here—it does not change anything, beyond the fact that an interesting actor is no longer available.

It is important to consider the difference between Lozano and Posenenske when discussing the critical potential and radicalism of dropping out of art. If spoke of radical inaction, I did so because of the absoluteness and finality with which a decision is made in such instances. Describing something as radical does not automatically imply attaching positive value to it, as the sideways glance at Richard Rorty's analysis showed. The motivation and aims of dropping out and the options for subsequent communication and action it opens up must be examined closely in each individual case.

Conclusion

Let me summarize: I use the term ostentatious inaction to describe artistic practices in which artists use acts of art to subvert or negate habitual or normative expectations regarding their actions they face or that are attributed to them.

I use the term communicative inaction to describe negative artistic practices, or practices that mark the omission of artistic acts as such in the field of art, leading to further communicative effects or even aiming to generate such effects.

I use the term radical inaction to describe the deliberate nonperformance of any artistic act, in conjunction with a temporary or permanent move to a different field of communication and action (leaving the field of art behind).

In the case of radical inaction, it is helpful to further distinguish between progressive and regressive dropping out in order to arrive at a closer characterization of such inaction in the individual instance.

In light of a performative conception of efficacy, which we are today inclined to ascribe also to the omission and nonperformance of actions, I would describe the first two forms of artistic inaction as generally, and the third as partially, practical in nature, and furthermore allow that they have played a partly reflective and partly even constructive role in the historical development of the field of art. For even when a dropout, once he or she is gone for good, leaves nothing but a void in the landscape of art, that void can nonetheless profoundly inform its environment. Although refusing to participate in the games of the art world cannot change the rules of the game, it can alter its course. If particularly critical and demanding minds were to retire from the game because they feel it is getting too dumb for their taste, their voices would be missing when the time might come to raise the standards.

If, on the other hand, those who never cared about standards in the first place were to leave, they might not be missed, and the general mood might improve. Either way, the resignation of a player shapes the game no less than a move within the game.

Many art dropouts go unnoticed; far from all of them are motivated by critical intentions; the departure of some may be a cause for relief. Others may leave a painful void and cause a stir in the scene; with yet others, their leaving may be symptomatic of doubts many people share without drawing the same consequences. When a dropout is explicitly motivated by a critique of the system, his or her act may even appear as pointedly articulating an institutional critique addressed to the institution of art as a whole rather than merely some of its parts. Taken together, such dropouts may be a cause of vexation to the field of art as well: they demonstrate that it is, to an unquantifiable number of people, dispensable.

When I began studying the issue in 2002, I shared Charlotte Posenenske's view that art is often discussed in the public sphere as "a commodity of transient topicality," rather than inspiring a debate over the real concerns it articulates. I was interested in seeing whether similar assessments might have motivated not only Posenenske but also other actors to leave the art world, and whether a sector of the public that was actually interested in debating social concerns might for the same reason have avoided the field of art from the outset. If we set the bar high and ask to which object the most brilliant and dedicated minds in our culture turn their attention, we need not necessarily conclude that art is that object.

But perhaps that is not correct after all? Maybe a skeptical assessment of artistic perspectives is merely synonymous with a skeptical assessment of socio-political perspectives more generally. To begin to answer such questions, it is worth studying the utopian views and the critiques of artists who withdrew from the field of art more closely, and to form

an understanding of the motives behind their retreat. The history, sociology, and criticism of art have long failed to consider the phenomenon. But as I hope to have shown, the steps individuals take as they drop out enact controversies over the meaning and perspective of cultural practices, over the social attribution of roles and their institutional legitimacy, over utopian ideas of society and their prospects of realization. That makes dropouts revealing. As we seek to understand the social evolution of the field of art, and ultimately to assess its relevance to society at large, the—often very personal—battles some art dropouts wage on their own minor turf can also tell us something about battles on a larger terrain.

APRIL 5, 70

(114)

IT WAS INEVITABLE, SINCE I
WORK IN SETS OF COURSE,
THAT I DO THE DROPOUT
~~PIECE~~ (NOTE ~~PIECE~~ PUN) PIECE. IT HAS
BEEN ~~CHURNING~~ CHURNING FOR A
LONG TIME BUT I THINK IT'S
ABT TO BLOW.

DROPOUT PIECE IS THE HARD-
EST WORK I HAVE EVER DONE

115

THE REASON DROPOUT
COPOUT, DROPOUT

(PFEIFFER: MIDDLECLASS COPOUT REFERENCE
TO ARTIST LYING INERT AS ARTSTATEMENT)
IS THE HARDEST WORK I'VE
EVER DONE IS THAT IT IN-
VOLVES DESTRUCTION OF (OR
AT LEAST COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING
OF) POWERFUL EMOTIONAL

HABITS.

KEY → EMOTIONS ARE ALSO HABITS
LIKE ANY OTHER REPETITIVE
BEHAVIOR.

I WANT TO GET OVER MY
HABIT OF EMOTIONAL DEPEND-
ENCE ON LOVE.

I WANT TO START TRUSTING
MYSELF & OTHERS MORE.



Boxender Dada-Vorbote: Arthur Craven (um 1912).

Ausstieg aus der überdrehten Welt muss nicht Schwäche sein

Eine sehenswerte Ausstellung in der Leipziger Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst zeigt vier inszenierte „Gesten des Abschieds“

Dass zum Leben der Tod gehört, ist leider unermüdlich. Wenn ein berühmter Mensch stirbt, erwartet man von ihm „letzte Worte“, die die Zurückbleibenden aufbauen und motivieren sollen. Mitunter freilich ist der Tod schneller, und es klappt nicht recht, das anzunehmen, was man für diesen Moment vorbereitet hatte. Der große Goethe hat nun mal nach dem „Pflöchen“ seiner Schwiegerochter Ottilie verlangt und nicht nach „mehr Licht“. An dieser Stelle springen die Mythenbauer ein, und schon waren für Generationen von Schülern „Mehr Licht“ die letzten Worte des Meisters. Sicherer geht

man, wenn das Verschwinden aus dem Gesichtskreis der Lebenden als große Inszenierung oder als Demonstration eines alternativen Lebens, jedenfalls aber als bewusster Akt vollzogen wird. Der Tod wird dabei in Kauf genommen, ist aber nicht das Ziel. Entscheidend bleibt die Fragestellung der jeweiligen Rolle in der Gesellschaft.

Die Galerie der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst zeigt am Beispiel von vier Künstlern unterschiedlicher Epochen die Radikalität einer vermeintlichen Sonderexistenz. Kein Mensch, möchte man sagen, lebt doch so. Doch genauer be-

trachtet und vor unsere eigenen Erfahrungshorizonte gestellt, sprechen auf einmal die Sonderexistenzen von unsrer aller Gefährdung.

Da ist Arthur Craven (1887–1918), Neffe Oscar Wildes und „Vorbote Dadas“, wie ihn Breton nannte, der um 1904 im Berliner Kriminalmilieu lebte, dann 1910 französischer Mittelgewichtssieger im Boxen wurde, 1912 bis 1913 die Kunstzeitsung „Maitre d'Hotel“ herausgab, vor dem Kriegsdienst nach Amerika floh und wohl auf dem Seeweg nach Argentinien ertrank. Craven ist der Künstler, der schon durch seine Existenz, durch seine

Sensibilität neben einer militarisierten Gesellschaft stehen musste. Da ist Bas Jan Ader (1942–1975), der ein zweifelhafte Ausstellungskonzept entwickelt hatte: den Film über die Vorbereitung einer Ozeanüberquerung in einem Segelboot und die Reise selbst, bei der er ertrank. Er ist der Künstler als Melancholiker, der bereit ist, mit dem Leben für sein Werk einzustehen. Da ist Lee Lozano (1920–1999) aus dem Freundeskreis von Sol LeWitt und Dan Graham, die sich eines Tages konsequent aus dem korrupten Kunstmarkt zurückzog, und da ist Chris Burden (geb. 1944), der Gesichtslö-

sigkeit und Abwesenheit in seinen Kunstaktionen immer wieder thematisiert.

Die Schau, die mehr dokumentarischen Charakter trägt, ist wichtig, weil sie über vier Biografien radikal nach dem Sinn sowohl des Lebens als auch der Kunst fragt. Und man begreift, dass der Ausstieg aus einer überdrehten Welt nicht unbedingt Schwäche sein muss. Von weitem liest Brecht darüber: „Es geht auch anders, aber so geht es auch.“

Peter Gath

Bis zum 22. 6. in der HGB, Väckerstrasse 11, Di-Fr 12-18, Sa 10-14.00 Uhr

Der Versboxer

Alexander Kochs provokant-witzige Ausstellung über Dissidenten der Kunstszene in der HGB

Wenn Kunst es nicht wirklich ernst meinen würde, könnte man sie manchmal belächeln: »Arthur Craven: Poet und Boxer, Neffe von Oscar Wilde.« Mit diesem Slogan warb Craven für seinen Boxkampf gegen den Weltmeister im Schwergewicht Jack Johnson 1916. Radikale Performances wie diese und seine schonungslose Dichtung, »Publikumsbeschimpfungen« allesamt, sind provokant, witzig und melancholisch zugleich. Schnell avancierte der Versboxer zum Inspirator für die frühen Dadaisten und Surrealisten in New York. Doch genauso rasant, wie er in die Kunstöffentlichkeit trat, verschwand er auch wieder – spurlos im Golf von Mexiko.

Radikale Attitüden kennzeichnen auch die Kunst von Chris Burden – dem einzig bekannten Künstler der Gruppenausstellung »Kunst verlassen«. Gestures of disappearance #1 in der Galerie der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst. Dessen Hommage an Artur Craven, das »b.c. mexico project« von 1973, wird ebenso dokumentiert wie seine Arbeit »You'll never see my face in Cansas City«.

Gesten des Verschwindens sind der thematische Rahmen der sehenswerten Ausstellung. Die Künstler, auch die Malerin Lee Lozano und der holländische Performancekünstler Bas Jan Ader sind vertreten, verweigern sich aber nicht aus Ideologiekritik dem Kunstbetrieb. In unterschiedlichen Epochen haben sie ihr Scheitern in der Kunstszene tragisch inszeniert.

Ihre Performances dokumentiert der Kurator Alexander Koch mit Textfragmenten, Fotos und Dokfilmen. Koch faszinierte die kompromisslose Haltung der Künstler: »Kunst als Job funktioniert nicht«, sagt er. Die Realisation der Ausstellung glich kriminalistischer Arbeit, da die Künstler beinahe vergessen oder in Europa immer unbekannt waren. Denn keine der Arbeiten entspricht markt gängigen Standards. Vielleicht ist



Arthur Craven vs. Jack Johnson (1916)

Kunst auch erst das, was Koch daraus gemacht hat. Allerdings ist es keine leichte Kost. »Meine Ausstellungen muss man lesen«, sagt Koch – genug Material hat er zusammengetragen.

ROBIN KASPER

➤ Noch bis 22. Juni in der Galerie der HGB

Fünf Tage im Schließfach

Eine Ausstellung in der HGB zeigt, wie vier Künstler „Kunst verlassen“ und ist damit erstaunlich aktuell



Kurator Alexander Koch in seiner Ausstellung „Kunst verlassen“

Kunst verlassen – Gesten des Verschwindens. Wie ist das möglich? Der Titel der aktuellen Ausstellung in der Galerie der Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (HGB) wirkt in sich widersprüchlich. Der Kurator der Ausstellung, Alexander Koch, erklärt: »Es werden vier Künstlerschicksale gezeigt, die jeweils in einer Grenzzone agierten und eine radikal-kritische Haltung zur Kunst ihrer damaligen Zeit vertraten.«

Da ist einmal der Dichter und Vorbote des Dadaismus, Arthur Craven. In der Zeit um 1910 beschimpft er hemmungslos die Kunstelite seiner Zeit, verliert den ersten Profiboxkampf der Welt in der sechsten Runde und bleibt schließlich 1918 im Golf von Mexiko verschollen.

Etwa 50 Jahre später bricht die erfolgreiche Malerin Lee Lozano ihre Karriere als Malerin ab. Seitdem stellt sie sich Handlungsanweisungen auf Notizen für den Rückzug aus der Kunst. Eine davon lautet: »Spreche nie mehr mit einer Frau.« Bis zu ihrem Tod 1999 will sie dieses Versprechen nicht gebrochen haben. Der noch lebende Chris Burden dagegen kündigt sein Verschwinden an. Etwa für »Five-Day Locker Piece«,

seiner Abschlusssarbeit 1971 an der University of California. Da verbrachte er fünf Tage in einem Schließfach Nr. 5 – unter in fünf Gallonen (23 Liter) Wasser, in Flaschen abgefüllt. Über ihm war dafür eine leere Fünf-Gallonen-Flasche. Burden gilt als einer der Väter der Performance-Kunst.

Das hätte Bas Jan Ader auch werden können. Doch 1979 kommt Ader bei dem Versuch ums Leben, auf einem 3,80 Meter langen Segelboot den Atlantik zu überqueren. Sein selbst empfundenes künstlerisches Scheitern wollte er auch körperlich fühlbar machen. Vorher hatte er das schon bei Projekten wie »Ich falle vom Baum in den Bach« per Kamera dokumentiert.

Doch was können solche skurril-tragischen Lebenswege einem durchschnittlichen Kunststudenten bringen? Kurator Koch: »Die Ausstellung macht auf jeden Fall nachdenklich. Viele Kunststudenten vergessen heute, dass es bei Kunst nicht nur um Handwerk geht.« Die Ausstellung, so Koch weiter, solle daher die existenzielle Dimension von künstlerischem Schaffen verdeutlichen, »den ständigen Zweifel am eigenen

Tun, den auch diese vier Künstler fühlten.«

Mit solcher Kritik scheint Koch den Nerv einiger Kritiker getroffen zu haben: Die Wand am Eingang der Galerie wurde beschmiert, Bilder umgehängt, der Strom abgestellt. »Das ist hier schon bei anderen Ausstellungen vorgekommen, aber nie so stark. Und das, obwohl gerade diese Schau sehr menschliche Züge trägt.«

Außerdem seien dadurch Leihgaben in Gefahr gebracht worden, so Koch. Manches davon sei erstmals in Europa zu sehen, etwa Videos aus dem Leben der Künstler. Trotzdem: Nur fünf Stücke sind wirklich Originale, denn »mehr gibt das Budget der HGB nicht her«, meint Koch. Der Rest sind Kopien oder Reproduktionen am Computer. Denn: Viel zu sehen gibt es nicht, an den Wänden hängen überwiegend persönlich-künstlerische Papiere der Künstler sowie drei dauerlaufende Videos. Doch gerade das passt auch zum Name der Ausstellung: Kunst verlassen.

nk
Ausstellung »Kunst Verlassen«: Bis zum 22. Juni in der HGB-Galerie, Eintritt frei.

Translations:

Dropping out of a World Gone Crazy Need Not Be Weakness

An exhibition of four staged "Gestures of Departure" at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst is worth seeing

[...] One is tempted to say: no one actually lives like that. Yet when we take a closer look and consider what we see in the horizon of our own experience, these singular characters suddenly speak to the precariousness of our own existence. [...] The exhibition, much of which is documentary, is significant because it explores four biographies for a radical inquiry into the meaning of life as well as art. And we understand that dropping out of a world gone crazy need not be a sign of weakness. We can almost overhear Brecht: "There are other ways that work, but this'll work too."

Leipziger Volkzeitung

The Versifying Boxer

Alexander Koch's wittily provocative exhibition on art-scene dissidents at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst

[...] At different points in the history of art, they turned their failure in the art scene into tragic performances. [...] Koch was fascinated by the uncompromising stances these artists took: "You can't do art as a job," he says. Putting the show together required real detective work, since the artists were virtually forgotten or had never had any reputation in Europe. None of art conforms to the standards that play well in the art market. And perhaps some of it is art only because of what Koch has made out of it. This is hardly light fare. "My exhibitions want to be read," Koch says—and he has compiled enough material to engage inquiring readers.

Kreuzer, 2002

Five Days in the Locker

An exhibition at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst presents four artists "leaving art behind," an idea that is surprisingly topical today

[...] The exhibition seeks to illustrate the existential dimension of artistic creativity, "the artist's constant doubt about what he or she is doing, which these four artists felt keenly."

Koch's critique seems to have hit a nerve with some critics: the wall by the gallery entrance was defaced, pictures were rearranged, the power was cut. "Similar things have happened with other shows here, but it's never been this bad, especially considering that the exhibition actually bears very human features."

The vandalism also posed a danger to works on loan, Koch said, including some that had never been on view in Europe [...]

But: only five pieces are true originals [...] The rest are replicas or digital reproductions. All in all, there is not a whole lot to see, much of what is on the walls are personal papers of the artists and documents related to their work; three videos are running in a permanent loop. Such austerity is fitting for an exhibition titled "Leaving Art Behind."

Studentmagazin Leipzig, 2002

In NO.5 Bergen Kunsthall revisits selected artworks and exhibitions, previously presented elsewhere in the world. Initiated in response to the increasing acceleration of both the production and reception of art, NO.5 provides an opportunity to slow down, focus on, and look again at particular works, exhibitions or fragments of exhibitions. Bergen Kunsthall will commission a new critical text to accompany each of these re-presentations. The text will appear in a publication series that is available online as a pdf and as a printed copy in our bookshop INK.

Published by Bergen Kunsthall on the occasion of the exhibition:

Gestures of Disappearance

Arthur Cravan, Lee Lozano

Bas Jan Ader, and Chris Burden Bergen Kunsthall, NO.5

28 May–16 August 2015

This exhibition is a re-presentation of was first shown in 2002 at the Gallery of the Art Academy in Leipzig, Germany, under the full title “Kunst Verlassen 1 — Gestures of Disappearance”.

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