

# REPORTS from the Dropout Center

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## Abstract

The protagonist of this short text on authorship and the reading of elusive female art practices takes the guise of a curious night watchperson who is investigating disturbances on the campus of the fictional Krabstadt Academy. Four artists' practices are discovered over time, and the protagonist uses ontological relationships and questions around viewing to ask what the narratives and outcomes of the practices they are "uncovering" are. The landscape is used as an intentional setting, which is partly based upon the history of the work *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) by Robert Smithson, but leaps off from that in imagining that it has been inhabited by four female artists who questioned the edges of authorship and the means of disseminating of conceptual structures—such as instruction, relational mechanisms, and production—and include Lee Lozano, Charlotte Posenenske, Laurie Parsons, and Cady Noland. Drawing on research into their strategies of "Dropping Out," the text intends to position their work in a historic understanding of something that is "uncovered," by a public and encountered from a different perspective. It also attempts to situate their practices and the movement of their gestures as being ignited by their imaginative qualities—through a physical reading of real works and installations, such as the exhibition of Parsons in Rottweil, Germany, in 1991, and real works and texts by Lozano and Posenenske—thus existing both in and out of "fiction."

This report compiles descriptions of a series of visits I undertook after numerous reports of sightings at an abandoned complex on campus.

## REPORT 1: Instructions for destruction

As I entered the partially buried structure, it was dark inside, and my only light in the blackness of the northern Scandinavian winter was a headtorch I had strapped on.<sup>[1]</sup>

With the wind whistling outside, I scanned the room and caught a glimpse of a stack of papers in a corner. On them, I saw a series of sheets of handwritten script, all in small capital letters. There was also a small red book with spiral binding, with the words "PRIVATE BOOK 1" scrawled on the cover. A circle was drawn in pencil around the number one.<sup>[2]</sup>

I shuffled through the papers, trying to get an insight into the character that may have left them behind, imagining I might find a clue that would lead me to discover the cause of the recent disruptions on campus,

which seem to be linked to this abandoned space.

Upon reading a few pages in the sharp light of my headlamp, I ascertained that these papers contained a series of instructions. For what? To construct a machine, or for fashioning an escape route? Who was instructing whom in these papers, and what were they telling them to do? I noted that it could be inductions to a cult or “secret society.”

I read: NO GRASS PIECE: GO WITHOUT GRASS FOR THE SAME AMOUNT OF TIME AS GRASS PIECE, WHICH TURNS OUT TO BE 33 DAYS. START IMMEDIATELY AFTER GRASS PIECE... PARANOIA STARTS...<sup>[3]</sup>

Note: are these papers from a diary? Is this partially subterranean building a place for someone to come to document their experiments? Maybe during their “NO GRASS PIECE” they were creating the smoke and lights that have been reported, making people on campus believe monsters or aliens have been lurking on the edges of the site.

But here’s another page: FOR ME THERE CAN BE NO ART REVOLUTION THAT IS SEPARATE FROM A SCIENCE REVOLUTION, A POLITICAL REVOLUTION, AND 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.<sup>[4]</sup>

Confusion: in the previous pages, the writer was focused on tuning in and dropping out, but this page speaks to more organized activity. Where is the evidence of groups, of meetings? It seems like this is just one person’s writing. Is this a highly individual activity documented in these papers?

It also says on the same page GENERAL STRIKE PIECE... and... MASTURBATION PIECE.

I conclude: a lot has been going on in this shed.

A last page I get to reads: 1<sup>ST</sup> WK AUGUST, 71. DECIDE TO BOYCOTT WOMEN. THROW LUCY LIPPARD’S 2<sup>ND</sup> LETTER ON DEFUNCT PILE, UNANSWERED. DO NOT GREET ROCHELL BASS, IN STORE. 2<sup>ND</sup> WK AUGUST, 71. PAULA TAVINS CALLS AUG. 11 TELL HER I AM BOYCOTTING WOMEN AS AN EXPERIMENT THRU ABT SEPT THAT AFTER THAT “COMMUNICATION WILL BE BETTER THAN EVER.”<sup>[5]</sup>

My report on these findings is inconclusive. I have found a diary or letters to others which describe anti-social behavior and possible ways of pushing oneself “to the border.” The results and evidence of any fallout on campus is yet to be determined.

## REPORT 2: Site of Production

Reports of loud noises once again sent me back to the partially buried shed on campus. For the second trip, I decided to go in the morning, so that what glimmer of northern sun there was could help me look through the clutter and maybe determine what is causing so much disruption.

Upon arrival, the door was wide open, and a few light cracks were coming through the roof. When I entered, I noticed large shapes, in cardboard, piled everywhere. Shapes that looked like air-conditioning ducts or long snakes of empty spaces that children would love to climb through.<sup>[6]</sup>

Note: has someone constructed an impromptu playground, or dumped piles of leftovers from an industrial-sized cardboard mock-up of air-conditioning units? Why do all the pieces fit together so neatly, and what is it assembling towards? Does it lead somewhere?

I noticed that there are only a standard number of shapes there are about six or eight different shapes, joined together into what seems like an infinite number of forms, which sometimes look like they come from other rooms or up from the floor. I could barely squeeze between the large cardboard shapes, and as I did, I wondered: why would someone spend so much time making this? Perhaps many people have worked on it, perhaps it is not a design at all, just an ongoing thought through form.

Are they prototypes? Do they have a function? Are they a mockery of function?

I knocked gently on them, to see if they were hollow or hiding something. I noticed that the surfaces were covered in fingerprints, so that what initially looked like clean, neat objects seem to have been handled and re-handled multiple times.<sup>[7]</sup>

I walked through the first room of the shed and into the second, where I found metal sheets leaning against the wall. Some sheets were bent in angles, and some were flat. They had thick sides, with shiny metal paint dripping over the edges from monochrome fronts.

I saw tacked to the wall:

## **CHARLOTTE POSENENSKE**

### **manifesto**

**The things I make are variable,**

**as simple as possible,**

**reproducible.**

**They are components of a space; since they are like building elements,**

**they can always be rearranged into new combinations or positions.**

**Thus, they alter the space.**

**I leave this alteration to the consumer who thereby again and anew participates in the creation.**

**The simplicity of the basic geometric forms is beautiful and suited to demonstrate the principles**

**of rationalized alteration.**

**I make series because I do not want to make single pieces for individuals,**

**in order to have elements combinable within a system,**

**in order to make something which is repeatable, objective, and because it is economical.**

**The series could be prototypes for mass production.**

**Series DW (at Fischer's) is made of corrugated pasteboard which is light and cheap: a material for consumption.**

**Often the elements or their combinations are very large in order to alter the spatial environment more thoroughly.**

**They approximate architectural dimensions and also for this reason differ increasingly from the former gallery objects.**

**They are less and less recognizable as "artworks."**

**The objects should have the objective character of industrial products.**

**They are not intended to represent anything other than what they are.**

**The former categorization of the arts no longer exists.**

**The artist of the future should have to work with a team of specialists in a development laboratory.**

**Though art's formal development has progressed at an increasing tempo, its social function has regressed.**

**Art is a product of temporary topicality, yet, the market is minute while prestige and prices rise the less topical the supply is.**

**It is painful for me to face the fact that art cannot contribute to the solution of urgent social problems.**

Offenbach, February 11, 1968

I understood: this space was being re-built from the inside out.

Conclusion: I believe I have encountered, in the partially buried shed, a portal which seems to contain the makings of something being broken apart and re-formed: social constructions, architecture. But the mystery to me is that there is no one to be found.

**REPORT 3: Signs of Life**

The shapes in the shed were left undisturbed. The next day I began to write my report but another disturbance of noise and light had been called into campus police the night before.

After lunch, I started on the thirty-minute walk to the shed again, with my handheld flashlight on the thick blanket of snow that had fallen the night before.

My boots crunched and punched down over ten centimeters with each step, and I was out of breath as I reached the woodshed. It seemed to be completely buried now. Somehow the snow had covered it, leaving only a shape, a kind of lumpen mass barely rising from the ground.

Note: the building cannot have been this sunken before.

After searching for where I thought the front door had been, then walking around the snowy lump, I found a door with a window in it around the back, brushed off the snow on the glass and peered in.

A perfectly constructed bedroom! An iron wrought bed, with homemade quilt, a wooden side table, candles, books, plates, a chair, and a small table.<sup>[8]</sup>

Someone must be here! I tried the handle, it was locked, and so I jangled through my keyring, and finally finding the right match, was able to step into, or rather down into, the room which was sunken lower than the day before.

The room was immaculate, like a model of a room.

What had been happening here? I read a sign on the wall that contained, in German, something along the lines of "Citizens of Rottweil are welcome here every day from 9 am until 12pm and evenings."

Note: the rapid transformation of the space again makes me wonder: is someone building fictional social constructions? Has it been used by people? From the neat piles of bottles and the cigarettes in the ashtray, from the deck of cards left in four hands around the table, it appears so.

Surely, this construction in the shed is a strange place to visit, to meet people in the middle of a snowstorm. Coming out here to the edge of campus and going downstairs into a room that appears to be a bedroom, with nothing else around.

I am beginning to wonder, and to start to worry a bit about my reports. How can I describe that I am beginning to believe that everything I have discovered is in some way intended to alter people's perceptions of their own inner and social workings? How is that going to solve the crime of ongoing and seemingly unstoppable disruptions?

Who is calling these problems into campus police anyway? Why am I repeatedly being asked to walk to the edge of campus, each time finding a completely new set of objects and arrangements, magically appearing and disappearing inside?

## REPORT 4: Total Carnage

I decided yesterday that I am out of my depth and that I need to ask for help from someone higher up than me, so that I can visit with backup next time I venture out to the shed, which also seems to be disappearing into the earth. I'm just not paid enough for this.

In order to ask for help, I submitted the three descriptions of my visits in a report titled "Visits to the Woodshed, Unmanned disruptions," which described my findings in depth and left as a conclusion that it appears that a group of people, or individuals one after another, had been using the shed as a place to conduct a series of experiments on how social relationships are constructed. Yes, strange to do this on the edge of a site (the campus), and yes, strange that each time the characters who inhabit the shed seem to disappear off the edge.<sup>[9]</sup>

Something about the entire endeavor seems to be sinking, disappearing, and wily.

Today, the Dean approved a team to join me, including students as they perhaps may have extra information about what has been seen and heard on campus.

We decide to bring cameras, measuring tape, a compass, and flashlights just in case. Luckily, the snow has melted by now, and the sky presents us with a clean, crisp blue low overhead. It's a bright, late winter day, and we will be able to see clearly inside. *That's if the building is still there*, I think to myself as we set off.

I've begun to wonder if all these objects have minds of their own.

We walk for forty minutes on frozen ground, which sometimes releases ice puddles of mud under our feet. We have a map but become disorientated toward the last five to ten minutes, because, as I had worried, there is no shed or structure to be seen. We keep searching in small groups and backtracking to one spot that is clearly marked on the map, looking at our compasses, and venturing out in directions we think will take us to the shed. The day is passing and I'm aware that we may only have a couple hours of light left and need time to return to campus.

Suddenly I hear a shout from another group, someone is waving in the distance and the rest begin to walk quickly toward them.

Someone says they have seen something in the ground, and as we look we can see the shed has completely sunken and looks partially burned.<sup>[10]</sup> The roof, which is at ground level now, is blackened and skeletal, and from the edge we can see into the various rooms below. It looks like total carnage.

Each room has a pile of junk strewn across it: beer cans, chains, glasses, cameras, magazines, baseballs, flare guns, leather gloves... There seems to be chain-link fencing, with objects hanging off, and strangely, a good number of aluminum mobility walkers in neat stacks.<sup>[11]</sup>

I start photographing each room from above. The compositions are better than the piles of junk. I am seeing beauty in the mess; I feel like I'm photographing a crime scene. Looking down into the rooms, I can see that each "pour" has been left to be seen from above, to be looked down at.

I realize that all these objects that have appeared in the shed in the past weeks have captured, or tried to capture and present, a moment of fleetingness not in a diaristic form, even though they may have appeared to be so at first. Rather, each document operates as a game-piece on a larger chess board, a board of gestures in relationship to social constructions. And now, as the shed will collapse under the earth, these gestures will continue to exist only in the re-telling of them.

## Footnotes

1. *Partially Buried Woodshed*, a work created in 1970 on the eastern edge of Kent State Campus by Robert Smithson, was made with an existing woodshed, dirt, and an instruction to let it deteriorate, to illustrate entropy in real time.
2. Lee Lozano's private notebooks were scanned for the public, made available and a facsimile of *Notebook 1* was published by gallery Hauser & Wirth in 2016, with the estate of Lee Lozano, and gallery Karma, New York. In my essay "The Embarrassment of SUCKCESS" (2018–20) I write: "In 2016? I went to go see the exhibition of small 'cock and cunt' paintings by Lee Lozano at Hauser and Wirth Gallery. What struck me was the strong sense that these works had been in storage, somewhere, for a long time. They were arranged, strangely, from small to large (being very very small to about the largest being A4 sized). Lozano, fully aware of scale, had made these privately, and someone, for years after her work was moved around, much of it lost—held onto them. They were embarrassing pictures. They painted Lee Lozano as someone furtive, mad. They were installed next to a show of Ida Appelbroog's paintings, as if to underscore the point about mental health. When I approached the young woman at the desk about the 'Lee Lozano notebook' for sale, a facsimile of equal scale, which says 'PRIVATE BOOK 1' on the cover, she excitedly tells me that all the notebooks are being made into facsimiles, for sale to the public, and that should I have any interest, all of her notebooks are scanned and available for research in the offices of Hauser and Wirth, anytime!"
3. "No Grass Piece" is a written number of pages by Lee Lozano from June 6, 1969, which detail the effects of stopping smoking weed after "Grass Piece." Both works are 33-day self-instructions and the "piece" that Lozano wrote up details daily reactions and struggles, and relapses of smoking pot.
4. "GENERAL STRIKE PIECE" by Lee Lozano, from 1969, was first published in Vito Acconci's magazine *0-9*, and is a re-inscription of a notebook page onto A4 paper, as were all of Lozano's "pieces."
5. From Lee Lozano's obituary, written by Roberta Smith, October 18, 1999, about the work "BOYCOTT WOMEN PIECE": "In 1969 and 1970 Ms. Lozano began a steady withdrawal from the art world in works that she titled 'General Strike Piece' and 'Dropout Piece.' She decided to boycott women for a month or two as a means of improving communication with them."
6. Charlotte Posenenske's works *Square Tubes (Series DW)* from 1967 is described on the Tate website as follows: "The artist produced a similar prototype titled *Square Tubes [Series DW]*, 1968, shortly after conceiving of the prototype for this work. This construction set differed (from her steel series *Series D*) in that two pieces were removed from the sequence and the steel was exchanged for corrugated cardboard. Burkhard Brunn, executor of the artist's estate, has suggested that with this development Posenenske sought to encourage the audience's contribution to the construction of the artwork, eliminating the need for technicians and skilled craftsmen to fabricate the piece (see Wiehager 2009, p. 76)."

7. From a letter between myself and Burkhardt Brunn:**Von:** Melissa Gordon

**Gesendet:** Freitag, 29. Juni 2018 10:21

**An:** Dr.Brunn

**Betreff:** Re: Images of Mechanics of Fluids  
Dear Burkhard, The installation is surprisingly stable! It was quite straightforward to put together, and felt that it was supposed to come together easily... Yes, the patina of touch on the objects is something I didn't expect but feels very important—and was something that was kind of raised in the discussion of the history of female artists being written in the show... Sorry I'm thinking aloud but it's an aspect of the work I hadn't considered before and was so nice to discover in putting it together and installing it. I didn't know that people can touch it—I've seen photos of other works being re-arranged by the audience, but of course the aspect of the installation being evident and that relationship is so interesting, to not make it perfect each time, not polish it like an object on display.

I am really in admiration of how the generosity and way the work is circulated and shared by the estate is so enabling of the practice over so many years...

No art is not made in heaven! It's made concretely on the ground. What a lovely thought.

Dear Melissa Gordon,

I am happy that the installation is okay. The different surface of the elements is indeed an important aspect in Charlotte's series D. Older pieces have sometimes figures of the craftsmen on the surface who didn't realize that the tubes are thought to be art... Charlotte did not only allow people to touch the installations or even move it, what is possible with the so-called revolving vanes, but also chose on purpose cheap materials like cardboard or steel sheet which she wanted to vanish in the course of time. This is another important aspect of her concept against the traditional notion of art to be untouchable and made for eternity. Her main idea was the continuity of her installations, so to be understood as fragments—an idea against the traditional notion of an artwork to be a perfect whole.

Many thanks for the images.

All the best for you and your show, Burkhard Brunn

8. From the book *Laurie Parsons: A Body of Work, 1987*, published by Museum Abteiberg in 2018, in the text "Laurie Parsons" by Renate Puvogel (originally published in *ARTIS Magazine* in 1991). Puvogel describes the exhibition of Laurie Parsons at the Kunst Forum Rottweil in 1991 as follows: "The citizens of Rottweil were already directly involved in preparations before the opening, because they were asked to loan the artists all the furniture and utensils she would need to live. Parsons used the loaned items to take up residence in the bright, wide exhibition hall for the show's six-week duration... Parsons herself participated as a person; city residents could reach her there every afternoon... And indeed the artist managed to involve guests in various completely unspectacular utterly familiar ways: from chatting over coffee to intense discussions about art and nature to a personal exchange of ideas... The artist spent mornings working at a home for the disabled—as a return service, so to speak, for the locals' support." (pp. 90–91).



9. From my essay "Presence and Absence": "Increasingly as an artist I have begun to feel my own voice becoming disembodied from myself. Who is it that is 'speaking'? It is strange to envision oneself as a construct, a concept, outside of your own body, but that is exactly what is perceived by others: an accumulation of objects, made by a non-entity with a vague persona, skewed and squared by gestures and contexts.///The Drop Out, as a figure or specter in the art world speaks to this externalization; it is a centrifugal force that spins questions about power and relations between art objects, makers, and lookers into themselves, behaving like a whirlpool of escaping possibilities. In this sense it's the perfect cipher through which to view the role of 'artist': the Drop Out deals in moves, gestures—and the value at stake of these. As a character, the Drop Out acts outside the bounds of the playing field of contemporary art, and by doing so, reveals the edge of the field at any time." (*May Revue* 9, 2016)
10. *Partially Buried Woodshed* was burned by an arsonist in 1975, and Kent State planned to demolish it, at the protest of Nancy Holt (then widow of Robert Smithson). In an article about her visit to Kent State, Holt is quoted as saying "There is something about it beyond the esthetic (sic), more a feeling. It is a work which deals with both interior and exterior perspectives. It has retained its essentialness and just stands there, questioning everything... The work is intrinsically political. It has such a feeling of the collapse of things... very prophetic..." Holt quoted in Halfhill, Tom. "Eart artwork 'questions everything,' says widow." *Daily Kent Stater*. Vol. XLVII. No. 100. May 9, 1975. Available at <https://dks.library.kent.edu/cgi-bin/kentstate?a=d&d=dks19750509-01.2.30&e=---en-20-1-txt-txIN---> (accessed 2022-04-19).
11. These objects are all recollections from my visit to the MMK to see the exhibition by Cady Noland in 2019.