

## Presence and Absence

Melissa Gordon

This text is adapted from a talk entitled "Presence and Absence" given at Artists Space, New York in October in 2015, as part of the series of events WE (Not I).

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 distanced form is 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.

"Dropping out" as a phrase points to two specific histories: the hippie logo "Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out" and the condition of leaving the workforce, mid-career, as befell/befalls many women, including many female artists. If *dropping out* was a pre-condition for being a female artist, let's say, at the time just preceding Lee Lozano's famous *Dropout Piece*—perhaps we can understand that work as a biting critique of the hippy motto—the current and ongoing ramifications on capital of *dropping out* in the art world, specifically for female artists, are more pointed and far reaching.

The document that piqued my interest in the character of the *Drop Out* is the essay "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil," Cady Noland's entry into the Documenta 9 catalogue, which accompanied her curated exhibition in Kassel. In trying to decipher the motivations of "Metalanguage," one uncovers a text attempting, I believe, to make a powerful critique of the art world and art market, predating a discourse around institutional critique and globalization, and staking out extreme positions on cause and effect, which is explored through the role-play of a *psychopathic* relationship. Noland begins her essay by describing that there is a "meta-game available for use in the United States. The rules of the game, or even that there is a game at all, are hidden to some." The essay goes on to describe in an oblique manner a relationship between X and Y, in which X is constantly, in a *Tom and Jerry*-like scenario, continually trying to *con* Y:



The game is a machine composed of interconnected mechanistic devices...A con or a snow job is the site at which X preys upon the hopes, fears, anxieties of Y for ulterior motives and/or personal gain...These machinations exist a priori of X and Y as an indifferent set of tools and could conceivably be picked up by anyone and used against anyone else.

Noland sets out the essay as a game or a device: it is key to keep in mind that the essay is not a *reading* of a situation or a metaphor, but exists purely as a theoretical overview of potential moves or gestures.

"Towards a Metalanguage of Evil" was first delivered at a seminar in the late 1980s, and was in some effect turned into or used to construct Noland's Documenta installation, which was a curated exhibition of art objects by her peer group, including Steve Parinno, Barbara Kruger, and Sherrie Levine, circling a sculptural installation of a crashed car, and interspersed with news photos of disasters such as plane Wreched. The essay, published in the Documenta 9 catalogue, is accompanied by similar images.

She begins her series of examples of *moves*, interestingly enough, by describing the cropping and foreshortening of tabloid culture as an example of the *tactics* of the game.

"Tabloids already use many of the game's tactics by foreshortening and "cropping" celebrities, blowing them up, and, in the case of National Enquire television commercials, reducing them to photo-objects and then animating these objects."

Later in the essay Noland references the film *Blowup* (1966) by Michelangelo Antonioni, noting that it is "through the exhumation of photographic images or audio recordings, and their repeated screening that Y searches for the telling detail (of X's "machinations and his attempts at putting forth a bankrupt reality")." There's an underlying interest in the role of images in the text, and the images's relationship to capital.

"On a larger, corporate level, the information hunt is called market research."

Information gathering is seen throughout the essay as a way for X to win at the game, to garner as much context into which he can entrap Y. Noland envisions a dystopic version of our contemporary culture of information gathering—our devices and apps delivering a constant stream of revenue generating data to corporations. But who is the psychopath in Noland's text? Perhaps it is the drive of investment capitalism itself.

"The psychopath shares the societally sanctioned characteristics of the entrepreneurial male." These quotes above point to an important contextual idea: at the time Noland is operating in relationship to the Pictures Group, and perhaps the essay is a critique of appropriation, or attempting to envision the future stakes of how appropriation as a gesture used by artists opens up a game centered around the formation of belief and value through manipulation of imagery, as it is used in corporate structures.

In "Pictures," a 1979 essay by Douglas Crimp written for *October* and describing the exhibition of the same name curated by Crimp at Artists Space in

1977, the author use both theatricality and staging as a means to both in effect *set the stage* of the emergent pictures generation as distinct from the performative quote "you had to be there,"<sup>1</sup> developping out of minimalism. Crimp describes the means by which Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman's pictures *enact* as well as present.

"The temporality of these pictures is not, then, a function of the nature of the medium as in itself temporal, but of the manner in which the picture is presented; it can obtain in a still picture as well as a moving one."

So if the setting of the stage of the image by Crimp is a pre-condition of appropriation, it can be implied that there is both a frontstage and a backstage to imagery. Noland also references Erving Goffman, interestingly, who in his book *The Presentation of Everyday Self* (1959), focuses on the way in which everyday actions have a *backstage*, which is often concealed from others.

"Towards a Meta-Language of Evil" ends with a rumination on "waiting for reconfiguration" as a strategy akin to using shock therapy on a patient. Noland talks about waiting for the environment in which the game is situated to change the "luck of the shuffle," as she calls it, as the last option of the psychopath. I think of it as X conciously going to hibernation.

"If X is a psychopath, the one certain thing is that this relatively passive strategy, waiting for reconfiguration, will only be used if it is the last game in town."

Cady Noland stopped exhibiting new work in the mid 1990s and there is a veil of mystery that surrounds her current presence in the form of absence. Has she set the stage for herself as an image and waited for a reshuffle, or reconfiguration, to re-emerge twenty years later, in order to alter the rules of the game? It was after reading and discussing "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil" that I discovered in a conversation with an older female artist friend that Noland's work *Oozeworld* had the highest selling price of a work by a living female artist, ever—sold for 6.6 million dollars at Sotheby's in 2012—and again recently for *Bluewald* for 9.8 million at Christies in May of 2015. It must be noted, 58.4 million is the current record sale for an artwork by a living man. After the sale of *Oozeworld*, when another work by Noland, *Cowboys Milking* (1990), was brought to auction at Sotheby's by Marc Jancou, Noland denied authorship of the piece, citing damage. Then, in May 2015, Noland disavowed the purchase of the work *Log Cabin*, citing inappropriate materials used for restoration, thus raising a moral dilemma around the authorship of the artist.

In the denial of authorship of *Oozewald*, Noland invoked the Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990, otherwise known as VARA, which states that artists hold the original moral rights to their work, regardless of ownership or copyright. In a November 9th, 2011, e-mail Noland's lawyer sent to Sotheby's on the evening before the scheduled auction, the artist insisted that *Cowboys Milking* was damaged and demanded that Sotheby's not sell it because "her honor and

1. "It can be said quite literally of the art of the seventies that "you had to be there" (Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," 1977).



reputation [would] be prejudiced as a result of offering [it] for sale with her name associated with it."

The recent article entitled "The Art of Cady Noland as Poison Pill," published on the online journal *Hyperallergic*, which focuses on Noland's denial of the sale of *Log Cabin*<sup>2</sup> (1990), implies Noland's action sabotages herself and the art world and her gesture is described as "art as bomb." But in a long correction, the author Seph Rodney notes that what seemed originally like a disavowal of work in the process of purchase, becomes a warning from the artist to new buyers that the current state of the work is unacceptable: "So it seems that Noland's response to Meuller (the most recent buyer) was essentially warning him off from believing this work was what she had crafted or intended."<sup>3</sup>

[OK, let's take a deep breath here.]

What initially interested me in Noland's legal battles around the question of authorship was the fact that the *highest* price ever paid for the artwork of a female artist was by one that is *not present* in the art world. Further, I became interested in her legal cases as the polar opposite of Richard Prince's legal case around authorship: instead of accumulating all voices into the artist Meta-Voice—as in Prince—rather it is the declaration of the absence of voice that accumulates value for a female artist. I began to think of Noland's essay "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil" as a *Dropout* piece, a declaration of intent akin to Lozano's Dropout Piece. I began to wonder how absence is in general used as a strategy—an absent X to the Y of presence—by women artists, both historically and now. Knowing Noland's essay, I have wondered if it provides clues to the meaning of her *drop out* and how this *drop out* relates to what I see as perhaps an attempt at a performance of a *con job* of the art market. Has the original—the object, the artwork—become a prop for a larger theater of value exchange? And if so, what role is the artist—Noland—playing in this production? Is it a production of denial? As with many other *drop outs*—Noland's gesture to leave, has been used to effect value, and to thus expand an understanding of *authorship* as such.

The question remains as to whether we can judge Noland's actions as authored moves, and if the legal language that surrounds the display of many of Noland's pieces, and lack of display and work, is in fact an artist's voice, or simply a lawyer's voice. It also remains to be seen where the value will end up: will Noland's work continue to become a desirable good, will she help pass legislation on the earnings of artists from secondary sales, or will the work be banished to storerooms for years to come? Regardless, Noland is not the first artist to use *dropping out* as a conscious gesture, or rather, to use the presence of absence as a device. The artists Lee Lozano, Charlotte Posenenske and Laurie

2. Please note in the article that it is clarified that the piece being discussed is actually "Log Cabin Blank with Screw Eyes and Café Door" (in Memorialum to John Caldwell), from 1993.

3. <http://hyperallergic.com/223591/the-art-of-cady-noland-as-poison-pill/>

Parsons all, through different means come to the same end of leaving because the possibilities of authorship were too narrow for their drives.

I am not interested in Lee Lozano, Charlotte Posenenske or Laurie Parsons for the sake of their obscurity. I do not believe the myths that they were "not able to hack it" or "hung the apron up." Perhaps they were smart enough to "wash their hands" of the situation they found themselves in, but regardless, each of their gestures expanded the role of authorship precisely because their actions existed *outside* of the playing field of art. The act of *dropping out* was simply the natural conclusion to their work: they took their practice to the extreme of authorship, and followed through.

It takes a shift in perception to consider *dropping out* as an act or a gesture instead of a circumstance. To do this requires the removal of an artist's biography from the understanding of their work. This is often hard when many women artists, especially those that have *exited* the art world—such as Sonia Delaunay to her successful applied arts company, and Agnes Martin during her mental breakdown—are shrouded in mystique. Forgotten or undervalued female artists can encourage a sense of *discovery*, a cat and mouse play: the finding of hidden histories as gems that we, in the art world are trying to uncover like truffle pigs. If we, though, consider, that historically the condition of *dropping out* was common and expected for female artists, the conundrum of presence and absence becomes a bit more fraught, especially in a re-evaluation or re-valuation of these women *rarities*.

Charlotte Posenenske was an Expressionist painter in Germany in the early 1960s who made beautiful works on paper and canvas. Her work shifted and became more sculptural and specifically machine-made towards the mid-1960s, which she began selling at material cost. Unlike her male peers, Posenenske's *specific objects* were specific to their value transactions in the world—materials as form, used to create systems, ideas, not profit. As a counter-minimalist strategy her gesture runs against the movement which literalized value transformation of everyday materials, exemplifying the disembodied aura of authorship. Posenenske, like most *drop outs*, has a "Drop Out" statement:<sup>4</sup>

I make series

because I do not want to make individual pieces for individuals, in order to have elements combinable within a system, in order to make something that is repeatable, objective, and because it is economical.

The series can be prototypes for mass-production.

[...] They are less and less recognizable as "works of art."

4. Charlotte Posenenske, "Statement," *Art International*, 12, no.5 (May 68), 50.



Posenenske ceased production in 1968, and retrained as a sociologist specializing in industrial working practices. She felt that art could not create the social change to inequity, and she abandoned any participation in the art world until her death in 1985. Her impulse to create or effect change without authorship also mirrors the practice of another artist, Laurie Parsons, whose art became so ephemeral she moved gradually and laterally into the role of a social worker. The little I know about Laurie Parsons comes from Bob Nickas's article<sup>5</sup> in *Artforum* from April 2003, which begins: "An artist sends her slides to a gallery and is asked to take part in a group show. (And how often does that happen? Does never sound about right?)." In 1990 her show at the Lawrence Monk gallery was empty: "I felt it essential that I consider the gallery itself, rather than continue to unquestioningly use it as a context. With its physical space and intricate social organization, it is as real, and as meaningful, as the artwork it houses and markets." My favorite recollection of a piece by Nickas of a piece of Parsons is a stack of 300 single dollar bills at the New Museum, with the instructions to the guards not to stop audience members from taking them. What can be said of it besides: "It quickly disappears." Parsons's work is contemporaneous with Rirkrit Tiravanija and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, but where is Parsons in the work, as a character? She is absent in comparison, but of course not, her role is quite present. Is she absent simply because of the lack of history? Because its natural conclusion is an opening out rather than a clarifying gesture? To quote Parsons: "Art must spread into other realms, into spirituality and social giving." In Bob Nickas's article from over twelve years ago, now, he tells us Parsons left behind the art world and became an advocate for the mentally ill in New York.

Why couldn't these women artists remain in the art world and continue to feel they were giving, contributing something, to people?

Lee Lozano is the most famous Drop Out, but her famous—and completely ephemeral—*Dropout Piece*, as with other *Drop out statements*, was the logical conclusion of a practice based on the lived, *living-out* of instruction pieces which she carried out. To quote Lucy Lippard on Lozano, from Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer's book on *Dropout Piece*<sup>6</sup>: "Her art, it has been said, becomes the means by which to transform her life, and by implication, the lives of others and the planet itself." Again, like Posenenske, Lozano puts a dark mirror up to the artists she is contemporaries with: her handwritten, frantic language, according to Lehrer-Graiwer flies in the face of the "ironic posing, dry neutrality or absurd businesslike" language of Conceptualism. Lozano is a mythic character for most—shrouded in sadness like Posenenske and Parsons, although the reality for all three is less sad, and more embedded and critical. Counter to the myth that Lozano dropped out and disappeared back home to Texas where she died of cancer and drug

5. Bob Nickas, "What ever happens to Dematerial Girl? On Laurie Parsons", *Artforum*, vol. 41, no. 8 (April 2003).

6. Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece* (London: Afterall Books, 2014).

addiction, Lehrer-Graiwer's book uncovers the fact that Lozano was enacting *Dropout Piece* even in New York for a decade: hanging out at CBGB's with Joey Ramone and Patti Smith, posing, dancing, talking and participating in the persona-driven punk scene of the 1970s. She was present as absent, just undocumented. Let's read the actual Dropout piece, which is just an entry in her diary:

I HAVE NO IDENTITY  
I HAVE AN APPROXIMATE MATHEMATICAL IDENTITY  
(BIRTHCHART)  
I HAVE SEVERAL NAMES  
I WILL GIVE UP MY SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AS A DEADEND  
INVESTIGATION  
I WILL MAKE MYSELF EMPTY TO RECEIVE COSMIC INFO  
I WILL RENOUNCE THE ARTIST'S EGO, THE SUPREME TEST  
WITHOUT WHICH BATTLE A HUMAN COULD NOT BECOME  
"OF KNOWLEDGE"  
I WILL BE HUMAN FIRST, ARTIST SECOND  
I WILL NOT SEEK FAME, PUBLICITY, OR SUCESS  
IDENTITY CHANGES CONTINUOUSLY AS MULTIPLIED BY  
TIME (IDENTITY AS VECTOR)

In all Drop Outs is that the edges of themselves dissolve *into* their work. They misbehaved as artists—they don't pursue self-promotion but rather self-discovery. Over and over the drop Out presents a negative shape of authorship, running counter to value creation in art history. Perhaps the Drop Out can also be situated within feminist art history: early feminist works foregrounded the personal/body/felt relationships to objects as much as authorial ones.

Derivative Value: in finance, a derivative is a contract that derives its value from the performance of an underlying entity.

David Joselit, in his essay "On Aggregators"<sup>7</sup>, describes a possible way to understand an exit from *the contemporary*. *The contemporary* is outlined not as a time, but a thing, a situation; a situation in which we are repeating the value structures of appropriation and postmodernism endlessly. We are not original, nor do we endeavor to be:

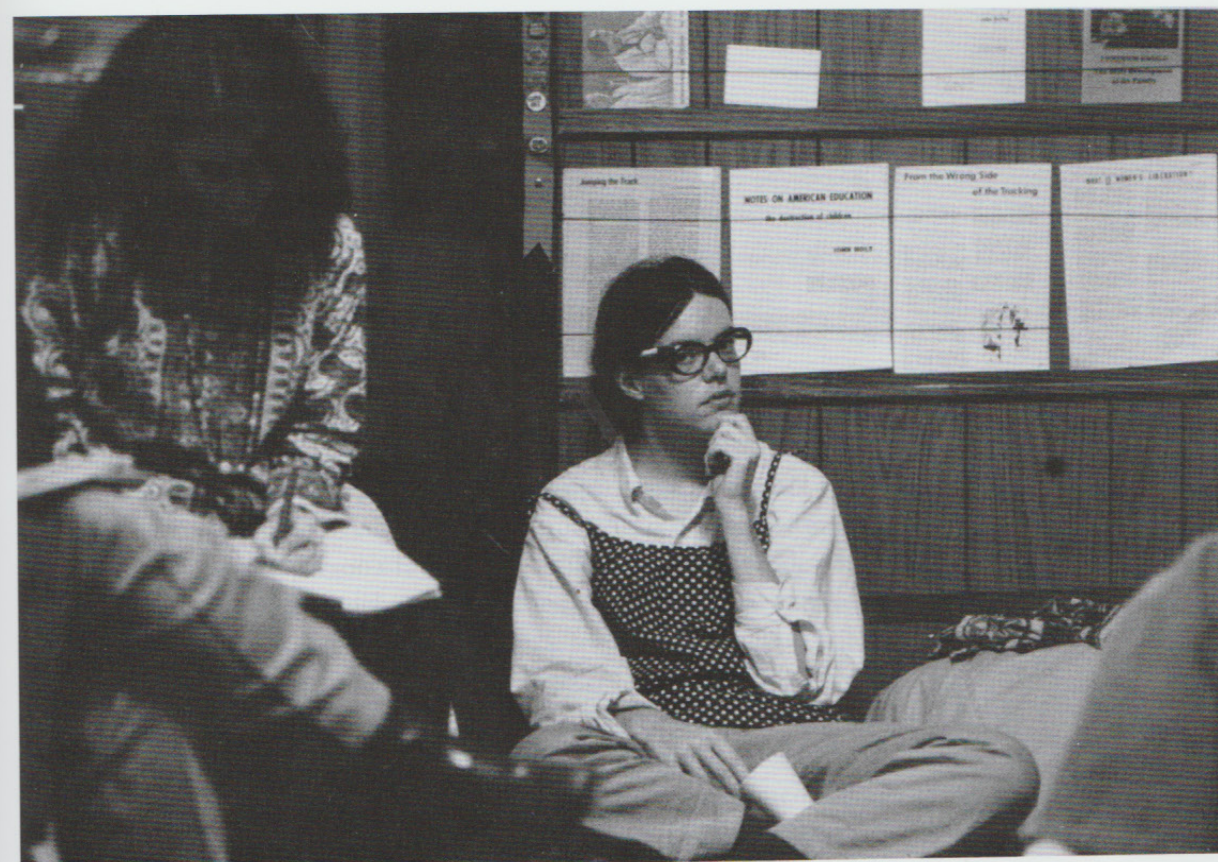
One of the great impediments to an understanding of global contemporary art is the vexing problem of the *derivative*. From a perspective that overvalues innovation, it is difficult to credit works of art that *speak* in idioms invented elsewhere. But this is what much art made outside of the West, not to mention the preponderance of art made in the West, has

7. David Joselit, « On agregators », *October*, no. 146 (Fall 2013), 3-18.



done since around 1980, when strategies of appropriation and postmodern pastiche entered American and European art. From the perspective of an international style, the *derivative* is no longer a problem since what matters is not the invention of a visual idiom or style but how rhetorically effective it is in its particular utterances.

The Drop-Out is a *negative* character, but only in the sense of creating negative space in a world with too much aggregation. Taking a step back from the front stage allows one to play with the normative role of *artist*. From this stance, I can embody myself as a performer one step removed from the action: a painter, a director, an editor. I look to the *drop out* because in it I see a freedom of movement in an art world seemingly driven by finance. A radical thing, something with no value to exchange, no information to cull, just a gesture, for all that it's worth.



Le fait de décrocher met l'accent sur deux histoires particulières: le slogan hippie « Vas-y, mets-toi en phase et décroche » (Turn On, Tune in, Drop Out) attribué à Timothy Leary mais que l'on suppose inventé par Marshall McLuhan, et la condition de quitter la population active, en milieu de carrière, ce qui est arrivé à de nombreuses femmes, y compris de nombreuses femmes artistes.

Le fait de décrocher était une condition préalable pour être une femme artiste, alors, à l'époque qui a immédiatement précédé la fameuse *Dropout Piece* de Lee Lozano, peut-être pourrions-nous le comprendre comme une critique mordante du slogan hippie. Mais les ramifications habituelles et en cours sur le capital du « dropping out » dans le monde de l'art, particulièrement pour les femmes artistes, sont plus nettes et vont beaucoup plus loin que la déclaration de Leary.

Je vais commencer par évoquer l'essai « Towards a Metalinguage of Evil » (Vers un méta langage du mal), introduction de Cady Noland dans le catalogue de la Documenta 9, accompagnant l'exposition qu'elle avait organisée à Cassel. En essayant de déchiffrer les motivations d'un « métalangage », on découvre un texte qui essaie, je crois, de faire une critique solide du monde et du marché de l'art, précédant un discours autour de la critique institutionnelle et de la mondialisation, et qui met en jeu les positions extrêmes sur les causes et les effets; tout ceci est exploré par le biais du jeu de rôle dans une relation « psychopathe ». Noland commence son article en disant qu'il existe un « ...méta jeu