

("QUOTE"): SOUND OF 'DAISY' FADING IN BACKGROUND FOLLOWED BY SOUND OF "ALSO SPRACH ZARATHUSTRA"(R. STRAUSS) FOLLOWED BY SOUND OF "THE BLUE DANUBE" (J. STRAUSS) - SOUNDTRACK, 2001 (S. KUBRICK)

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.§

IN PROCESS AT LEAST THROUGH SUMMER, '69.⊕

* WITHDRAWAL FROM 3-~~MAN~~^{ARTIST} SHOW COMPILED BY RICHARD BELLAMY, GOLDOWSKY GALLERY, 1078 MADISON AVE.

† DATE OF LAST VISIT TO UPTOWN GALLERIES FOR PERUSAL OF ART - FEB. 13 OR 14, '69
" " " " " A MUSEUM - MARCH 24, '69

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Lee Lozano: Strike

Author(s)

Daniel Culpan

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About the author(s)

is a writer based in London.

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Lee Lozano: Strike

by Daniel Culpan • 26.04.2023

Contradiction is the engine of the work of Lee Lozano (1930–99). In February 1969 she wrote the instructions for *General Strike Piece* **FIG.1**, which initiated her withdrawal from the New York art world. Initially meant to last ‘at least through summer ‘69’, she set out to ‘gradually but determinedly’ avoid official functions or gatherings in order to pursue ‘investigations of total personal and public revolution’. Paradoxically, it is this work that secured her reputation as an artist. Considering Lozano’s all-consuming attempts to dissolve the boundaries between life and art, her work presents a slippery task for curators – in particular, how to reintegrate the artist into the very system that she resisted. For *Strike* at Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin – Lozano’s first retrospective in Italy – the curators, Sarah Cosulich and Lucrezia Calabrò Visconti, have approached this challenge by dividing the work into seven thematic rooms. This is a particularly risky approach when dealing with an artist who rejected the idea of labels altogether.

The first room presents a selection of drawings made between 1959 and 1964, which reflect a central, obsessive preoccupation: how the body is distorted by the logic of patriarchy and capitalism. The drawings are tightly clustered on the walls **FIG.2**, augmenting their somewhat aggressive quality. Detached from the body, penises are arranged alongside phallic drill parts and hammers. Elsewhere, male genitals replace noses and sprout from hands. These objectified body parts – complete with grinning mouths and graphic exhortations (‘let them eat cock’) – are animated by a psychosexual menace, as if scribbled directly from the id. In Lozano’s caustic, cartoonishly pornographic universe, the phallic dominates. Women are largely absent. One exception is her pastiche of Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* (1866), in which a faceless, supine female body is transformed into a slot machine, a coin ready to be inserted between her legs **FIG.3**. This satirical critique of the patriarchal narrative of Western art history operates with blunt force. Yet, as with almost everything else, Lozano’s relation to feminism, and indeed other women, was deeply vexed.

Lozano’s strike action in 1971, to ‘boycott women’, remains her most contentious and ostensibly counterintuitive work. It also underscored a refusal to align herself with any single cause or ideology. Lozano initially conceived the month-long vow of silence as a means to draw attention to the imbalance of gendered relations: ‘I am boycotting women as an experiment thru abt [*sic*]

September & after that “communication will be better than ever”, she wrote. However, it appears that she maintained the boycott for the remaining twenty-eight years of her life, severing ties with everybody from lifelong friends to shop assistants. For instance, the artist Carol LeWitt (b.1948) has stated that Lozano would cover her eyes and turn away whenever the two of them met.¹ The curator and art historian Helen Molesworth has argued that Lozano’s refusal to speak to women ‘implies an understanding of patriarchy that is akin to her rejection of the art world’ and that she realised that one could not change things ‘by bonding only with women’.²

In the fourth room of the exhibition Lozano’s series *Tools* **FIG.4** co-opts the macho, architectural tropes of such Minimalist artists as Carl Andre (b.1935) and Richard Serra (b.1938). These paintings blow up screws, hammers and other industrial parts to monumental size, visually manipulating these banal mechanisms of power. Nevertheless, Lozano homes in on a troubling eroticism in the symbols of latent violence, with their pulverising heft and monochrome flatness. It is disappointing that only a handful of paintings from this series – one that comprises some of the most arresting works in Lozano’s oeuvre – are displayed in the exhibition. This is exacerbated by the framing of these works in the exhibition booklet, which states that the ‘core of the show’ is dedicated to this series, despite it being meagrely represented.

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 " " " " " A MUSEUM - MARCH 24, '69
 " " " " " UPTOWN GALLERY OPENING - MARCH 15, '69
 " " " " " A BAR - APRIL 5, '69
 " " " " " ATTENDANCE AT A CONCERT - APRIL 18, '69
 " " " " " " " FILM SHOWING - APRIL 4, '69
 " " " " " AN "EVENT" - APRIL 18, '69
 " " " " " A BIG PARTY - MARCH 15, '69

2 TERMS OF TOTAL PERSONAL & PUBLIC REVOLUTION SET FORTH IN BRIEF
 STATEMENT READ AT OPEN PUBLIC HEARING, ART WORKERS COALITION,
 SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS, APRIL 10, '69. FURTHER PARTICIPATION IN
ART WORKERS COALITION OR ANY OTHER GROUP DECLINED AS PART OF
GENERAL STRIKE PIECE. THIS INCLUDES ARTISTS AGAINST THE EXPRESSWAY
 GROUP & OTHERS.

4 FIRST PIECE EXHIBITED AT ART/PEACE EVENT, N.Y. SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL,
 PUBLIC THEATER, MARCH 5, '69. GRASS PIECE & NO-GRASS PIECE EXHIBITED IN
 NUMBER 7 SHOW COMPILED BY LUCY LIPPARD, PAULA COOPER, MAY 18, '69.
INVESTMENT PIECE & CASH PIECE^{EXHIBITED} IN LANGUAGE III SHOW, DWAN GALLERY,
 MAY 29, '69.

5 ENDED FALL '69, WHEN SCHIZO SYMPTOMS BEGAN TO APPEAR (HE IN HERE VS. THEM OUT THERE). I STILL REGRET
 MISSING SOME ART EVENTS THAT TOOK PLACE EARLY IN SPRING '69, & APPEAR TO HAVE ALIENATED A FEW HUMANS
 LEE LOZANO, JUNE 12, '69 BECAUSE OF MY WITHDRAWAL AT THIS TIME. (JAN 24/71)

PUBLISHED IN O.T.O.B., No. 6, JULY, '69, VITO ACCONEI & BERNADETTE MAYER, EDITORS (CARBON COPY)

Fig. 1 *General Strike Piece*, by Lee Lozano. 1969. Xerograph, 27.9 by 21.6 cm. (© Estate of Lee Lozano; courtesy Hauser & Wirth; photograph Stefan Altenburger; exh. Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin).

Whenever it seemed that Lozano’s work might assume a signature style, she transformed it into something else. Another room in the exhibition is devoted to the series *Airplanes* (1962–63), comprising paintings and works on paper, in which metamorphosis takes full flight. In the turbulent canvases, paint swirls into animalistic tails and grins leer from amorphous forms. In the drawings, there is a lighter, more playful hand at work. Abstract sketches of human anatomy – faces, noses, ears – are penetrated by the buzzing motion of tiny airplanes. The body becomes a centrifugal force, liberated from its status as settled object; ‘Let worries fly out all holes at once’, she wrote in a 1969 notebook entry.³

For Lozano, every hierarchy was a prison and the final limit was language itself. *Pun Value* is a series of drawings made in 1962. Experimenting with wordplay and verbal innuendoes, they provocatively restate the question at the heart of Lozano’s

project: what does it mean to refuse the terms of a pre-existing system? In one drawing, a tube of paint is squeezed into a businessman's hand, 'bullshit' angrily crayoned above. *No title (ass kisser)* FIG.5 lands another blow to the sycophancy of the institutionalised art scene: a smoking man in a suit finds his head transformed into a pair of buttocks. In another work, a penis is mangled inside a typewriter, the keys of which have been re-labelled 'no', 'work', 'think', 'mutha', 'shit', 'cunt' and 'off'. Lozano's furious communication becomes another form of protest: turning words into visual action against anything that mechanises or deadens, including the rules of language itself.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Lee Lozano: Strike* at Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin, 2023. (Photograph Sebastiano Pellion Di Persano).

Having previously left the majority of her works untitled, the artist named each of her large-scale paintings made between 1964 and 1967 after a verb. These works activated a new, purer kind of abstraction. In *Cram* FIG.6, a wedge of red paint strikes down a canvas pared back to pewter darkness. In *Clamp* (1965) two canvases painted with metal-oxide cones of bronze and steel are joined together, creating intersecting yet disrupted planes of colour. Coldly austere, they demonstrate the ways in which Lozano was attempting to transform paint, with its mysterious surfaces and density, into a kind of elemental charge, a force trying to escape its own physical limitations.

The seventh and final room of the show, 'Life-Art Pieces', is dedicated to the textual works that Lozano created between 1968 and 1970. Written on graph paper or taken from the artist's journals, which were labelled 'private books', these pieces contain lists and instructions for a final breakdown of the distinction between 'artist' and 'person'. *Dialogue Piece* (1969) was an

experiment in art not to be exhibited: 'Call, write or speak to people you might not otherwise see for the specific purpose of inviting them to your loft for a dialogue'. *Dropout Piece* (1970), on the other hand, appeared to be an attempt to dissolve the self altogether, through 'diminished consumption: of calories, cigs, dope; of joyous energy (like dancing), emotions, intensity; of restlessness, ambition, work'. In an untitled piece from 1971, she declared: 'I have no identity [...] I will make myself empty to receive cosmic info. I will renounce the artist's ego'.



Fig. 3 *No title*, by Lee Lozano. 1962. Oil on canvas, 83.8 by 73.7 cm. (© Estate of Lee Lozano; private collection; courtesy Hauser & Wirth Collection Services; exh. Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin).

There are inferences in Lozano's notes that her radical artistic experiments with marijuana – for *Grass Piece* (1969) she smoked every day for a month and recorded the results – and LSD began to fray her mind. Later, emptying herself of language altogether became Lozano's final bid for transcendence. After exiting the art world, she contracted her name – using Lee Free, then Leefer, then Eefer and finally, simply 'E'. She lived an itinerant life before moving in with her parents in Dallas in 1982, where she remained until her death from cervical cancer in 1999. She never made

another painting or drawing again. Her final act of erasure was choosing to be buried in an unmarked grave. For an artist as fascinating and enigmatic as Lozano, it is perhaps impossible for a retrospective to fill in all the gaps. *Strike* delivers a persuasive if partial overview of Lozano's mission: using one's life to make art as absolute and irresolvable as life itself. In Bruce Hainley's astute analysis, Lozano was, finally, 'not misogynist or misanthropic, not even transhuman, but sheer *trans*, beyond dematerialization'.⁴ This brings to mind Lozano's early self-portraits in charcoal **FIG.7**: her curious, undaunted stare, the outlines of her face half-rubbed out. Here and not there; there and not here.

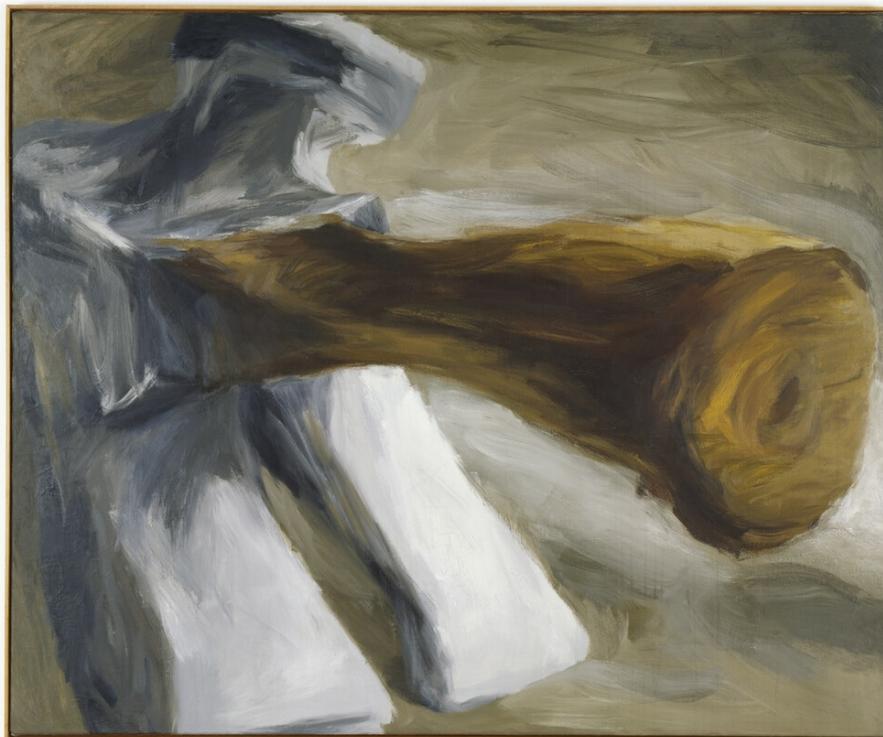


Fig. 4 *No title*, by Lee Lozano. c.1962. Oil on canvas, 126 by 150 by 1.8 cm. (© Estate of Lee Lozano; private collection; courtesy Hauser & Wirth Collection Services; exh. Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin).

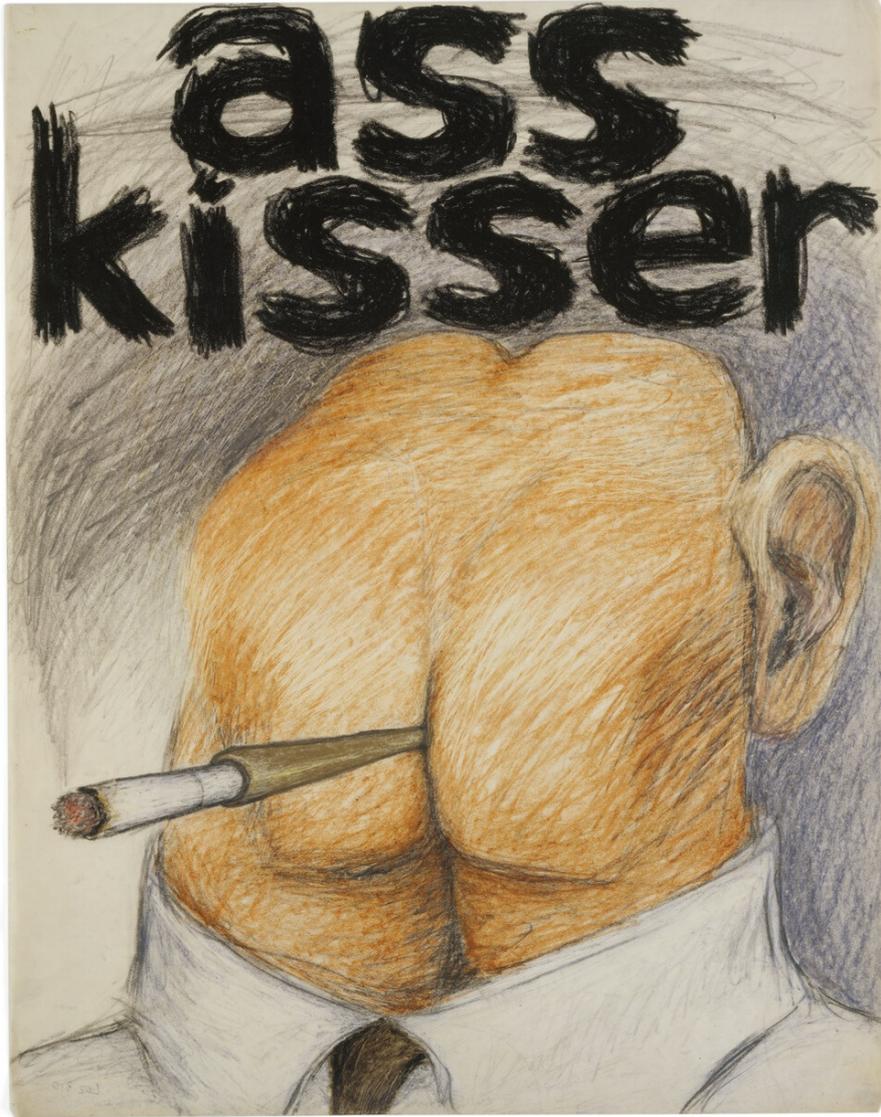


Fig. 5 *No title (ass kisser)*, by Lee Lozano. Crayon on paper, 60 by 47 cm. (© Estate of Lee Lozano; private collection; courtesy Hauser & Wirth Collection Services; exh. Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin).



Fig. 6 *Cram*, by Lee Lozano. 1965. Oil on canvas, 198.1 by 198.1 by 3.8 cm. (© Estate of Lee Lozano; courtesy Hauser & Wirth; photograph Barbora Gerny; exh. Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin).

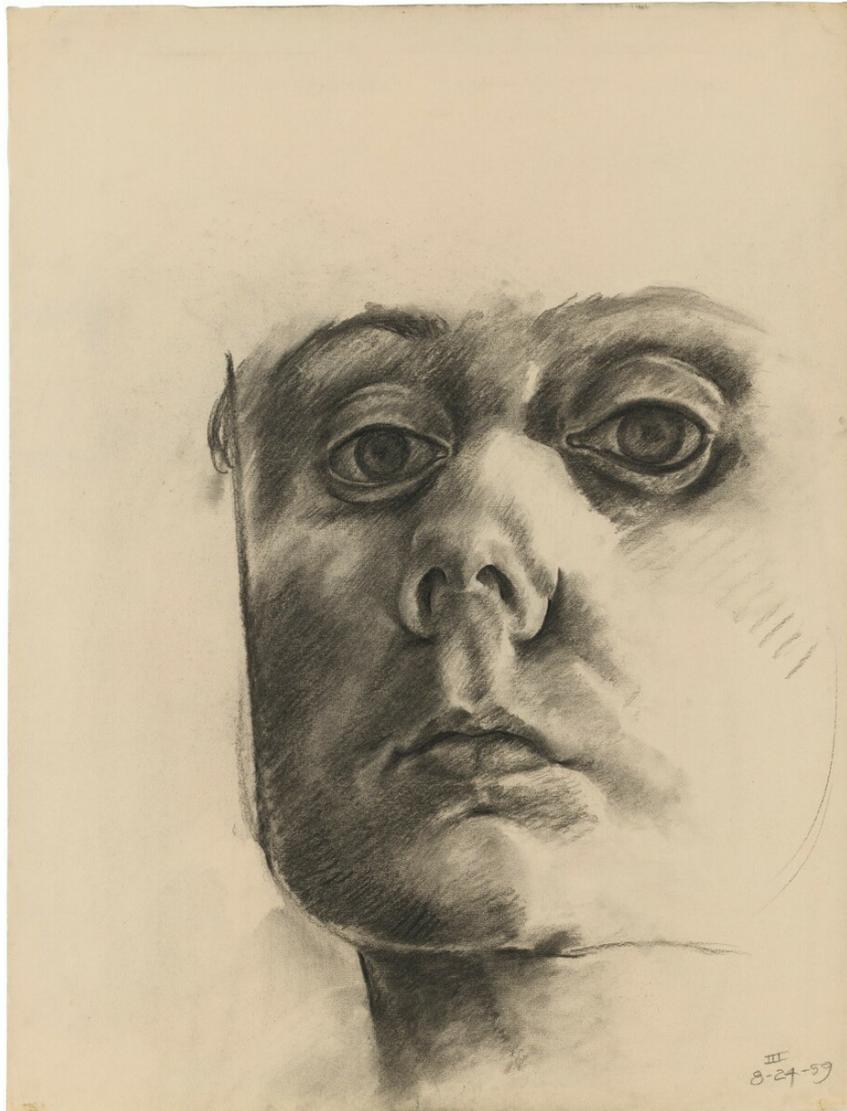


Fig. 7 *No title*, by Lee Lozano. 1959. Charcoal on paper, 63.5 by 48 cm. (© Estate of Lee Lozano; private collection; courtesy Hauser & Wirth; photograph Stefan Altenburger; exh. Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin).

Exhibition details Lee Lozano: Strike
Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin
8th March–23rd July 2023

Footnotes

- 1** See J. Applin: 'Hard work: Lee Lozano's dropouts', *October* 156 (Spring 2016), pp.75–99, esp. p.75, note 3, doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00252.

- 2** H. Molesworth: 'Tune in, turn on, drop out: the rejection of Lee Lozano', *Art Journal* 61, no.4 (2002), pp.64–73, at p.71.
- 3** Lee Lozano quoted in S. Lehrer-Graiwer: *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*, London 2014, p.46.
- 4** B. Hainley: 'On "E"', *Frieze* 102 (October 2006), pp.243–45, at p.247, available at www.frieze.com/article/e, accessed 25th April 2023.

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