

ArtForum, Oct, 2001 by David Reed

Making Waves - David Reed on legacy of artist Lee Lozano - Interview

KATY SIEGEL TALKS WITH DAVID REED ABOUT THE LEGACY OF LEE LOZANO

LEE LOZANO ISN'T EXACTLY A HOUSEHOLD name--even in art houses. But in the 1960s and early '70s, she was very much part of New York's art scene; she knew everyone and is remembered as an intense and engaging figure (her inamorati included such diversely talented men as Dan Graham and Joey Ramone). To say the least, Lozano had a strange--and brief--career; though lasting just over a decade, it encompassed a series of distinct styles and practices. For several years, she exhibited regularly, including group shows at Richard Bellamy's Green Gallery in 1964 and 1965. Later she distanced herself from the art world before finally dropping out altogether.

Lozano, born Lenore Knaster, attended the Art Institute of Chicago in the '50s (where she met her future husband, Adrian Lozano) and began her career in the early '60s making cartoonish, overtly sexual paintings and drawings, not unlike the hand-painted Pop of Peter Saul, early Claes Oldenburg, or the late efforts of Philip Guston. By the mid-'60s, her imagery became more abstract, more formal and hardedged, as in her monumental "tool" paintings, which depicted screws, pipes, and wrenches mostly in somber grays. Despite the industrial cruelty of these works, the humor and sexuality of the earlier efforts persisted.

Lozano's next body of paintings consisted of completely abstract works that interrogated painting's basic elements. Drab browns, oranges, and smoky purples covered shaped canvases--often several were assembled to form a single painting--which may have been slashed or perforated with cut-out shapes. One exhibition of these works was reportedly held in a dark room; viewers were given flashlights to move across the canvases, allowing them only slowly to piece the paintings together. The most critically recognized late paintings were the eleven canvases comprising the "Wave" series, 1967-70, in which Lozano painted wavelengths of light multiplying exponentially. Like her other work of the period, these canvases incorporated duration as well as a pictorial space that expanded to include both viewer and artist. For a last series, planned but never realized, Lozano wanted to make the same painting in various states: stoned, drunk, horny, etc.--not only summarizing the going passions of the day, but demonstrating her belief in completely intermingling art and self, despite the work's apparent intellectual cool.

Indeed these gestures point to, and share much with, the conceptual work for which Lozano is best known. They reveal her desire for painting that moved beyond the limits of the canvas, incorporating the viewer's and the

artist's lives. In the late '60s, Lozano began extending her art to include various activities in her studio-loft, interactions with friends and colleagues, and experiments with her relationship first to the art world and then beyond. For *Real Money Piece*, 1969, she invited people to either contribute money to or remove it from a glass jar, noting their response ("Larry" Weiner took a dollar; Brice Marden laughed and said he didn't need any). Some of the pieces were instructions for solitary actions, such as *Throwing Up Piece*, 1969, in which Lozano threw the twelve most recent issues of *Artforum* in the air. Other important works expressed her increasing disillusionment and alienation from the art world. Perhaps most famously, Lozano decided to stop speaking to women for a month, as an artwork- -an action that continued for almost three decades, until her death in 1999. She had long since left the art world, first for New York's budding downtown music scene, and eventually for Texas, her final home. Very little is known about her life after the early '70s.

Recently, I talked about Lozano with the painter David Reed, who has been interested in her art since the late '60s. This past year, an invitation from the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas, Austin, to study a group of paintings bought with Richard Bellamy's advice (including Lozano's *Ream*, 1964) afforded Reed the opportunity to think seriously about her work and the historical context that gave rise to it. This summer, he accompanied me on a visit to Chelsea gallerist Jaap van Liere's barn-studio in Pennsylvania, where much of Lozano's art is stored. Reed's own work plays with our peripheral vision as well as our sense of time--both central to the "Wave" paintings he loves. He also sees Lozano, in her restless relationship to the medium and in her conceptual experimentation, as both a model and, in her disabling anxiety, a cautionary tale. As such, her multifaceted practice is a decisive link in the secret history of avant-garde painting that has persisted in the wake of the endgame strategies of the '60s.

KATY SIEGEL: How did you first encounter Lee Lozano?

DAVID REED: I knew about her work, saw her at openings, and knew her slightly when I first came to New York. The most direct contact would have been around 1971, after she had lost her loft on Grand Street. She was looking for places to stay and considering that process part of her work, and ended up staying with me. Lee was very moody, drinking a lot of cheap wine and smoking lots of dope. I was raising my young son and had to ask her to leave after a few days. I remember thinking that she was a kind of warning about what could happen if you mixed art and life too closely, that it could get very dangerous if you had no boundaries.

KS: What do you think is important about her painting now, and in what context do you see it?

DR: I'm very interested in what happened to painting in the late '60s and early '70s, when it was removed from the dialogue about what the most advanced art was. It seems to me that there was very advanced painting being done, and that it fits into a post-Minimal context. Lee Lozano, Jo Baer, Ralph Humphrey, Dorothea Rockburne, and Peter Young would be

my favorite examples, and of course Robert Mangold and Robert Ryman. But the others are less well known, and I would say less Minimal, more post-Minimal. They were reacting against Minimalism, and trying to develop something from it. To me, that painting is the equivalent of Robert Smithson or Barry Le Va, things that were happening in sculpture.

KS: What are some of the common issues between that kind of more familiar sculpture and the post-Minimal painting you're talking about?

DR: Time and the experience of time, both in the process of making and in the viewing. This generation of painters developed a kind of painting that was 3-D or wraparound, where the viewer moves around the work physically, having perceptions that change and accumulate.

KS: What were Lozano's particular contributions? Her career was so short--about ten years--but productive, with several different kinds of practices.

DR: She goes through a very unusual development, a kind of compact history of art. From surreal, almost Pop images through large-scale abstraction that uses tool imagery, to completely abstract paintings and, finally, conceptual art. I think that the late abstract paintings were the most advanced paintings being done at the time.

KS: How are they "post"-Minimalist?

DR: There has been a real emphasis on wholeness in postwar art, especially for Donald Judd and the Minimalists. Lozano turns that into a more general concept of having a whole life or experience. In the tool paintings, she makes them so that they seem to extend beyond the edges laterally, and back and forth spatially, so they don't seem to be contained by the frame. And then in the later abstract paintings, she turns this inside out: Sometimes there are two stretchers put together on a diagonal, or paintings where she cuts holes through the canvas, exposing the stretchers. I think of these as internally shaped canvases, where the outside edge isn't controlling things, and where the inside edge controls not just the painting but everything, extending out into the world.

KS: Similarly to Pollock, or allover painting's Implications of endlessness?

DR: Pollock implies that, but in a limited way; the space really doesn't extend much past the painting, in Lozano, it's really endless. For example, in the "Wave" paintings, which were realized between 1967 and 1970, there are ten completed paintings, each painted in one session. She started with two waves and added more waves again and again, moving up to a ninety-six-wave painting, which took three days working continuously to make. On an eleventh painting she then tried to paint double the ninety-six wave, but physically she couldn't do it in a single session; the painting remains just sketched out in pencil and not painted. So the series is infinite, it's just her physical limitations that stopped it.

KS: Unlike a LeWitt series, which is finite. It seems to combine a rigorous scientific approach with some kind of personal statement.

DR: Her interest in science is a way of connecting art to larger issues and keeping it from becoming merely formal. I think the "Wave" paintings are one of the three great series of American painting, along with Barnett Newman's "Stations of the Cross," 1958-66, and Andy Warhol's "Shadow" paintings, 1978. I'd love to see the three of them together.

KS: Is there a connection between them?

DR: Newman's series is about transformation of the self. Warhol's is about the difficulties of that transformation and doubts of the self. And Lozano's "Wave" paintings seem to offer proof of the difficulties of that transformation of the self, and reasons for the doubts. The series is meant to be endless, but she can't make it endless. It ends physically, not conceptually. She desires more than she can achieve, not just physically, but in other ways as well. It's like Kafka saying, "Oh, there's infinite hope, just not for us."

KS: Even if their content is different, they all seem to share a certain attitude toward painting that is peculiarly matter-of-fact.

DR: Definitely. I love this category that the art historian Richard Shiff has of "declarative surface," which he takes from Newman, who wanted his surfaces to be workmanlike, there to provide information--painted about as nicely as you would paint a wall. You don't want to do a sloppy job, but you don't want to do an overrefined job. She has that attitude, and I think a lot of painters do. You want to show the process, but the surface certainly isn't expressionist.

KS: That sense of surface seems to carry over to her use of color; critics have complained about the drab colors she uses, the limited palette in the "Wave" paintings, for example.

DR: She was afraid of becoming decorative and was looking for a way to use color within the range that's available, that seems relevant to the moment. In her journals she uses the term "non-color." Looking at the "Wave" paintings, I thought of a postindustrial dystopia; the colors brought to mind Smithson's work, or Warhol's "Disaster" paintings. I wonder if she went with Dan Graham on some of Smithson's tours of New Jersey. I think that kind of late-'60s sensibility is very much in the paintings. There was a real hit of political reality. Bright-colored, optimistic painting, peace and love, was no longer relevant. It was very hard for some artists to deal with the change in climate, which happened suddenly in '68.

KS: Many painters left New York at that time. What made them so discouraged or embattled?

DR: I've been studying a group of abstract paintings made between 1964 and '69 in the Michener Collection at the University of Texas, Austin, bought on Richard Bellamy's advice. I didn't understand the sense of crisis in the works until I thought of what I was doing at the time--I had fled New York too and went to New Mexico. I thought it was the end of cities,

no more civilization. Painters continued to make art in that context of radical change. Lozano found away to do it, and color is important to her thinking.

KS: Still, even though she kept making art, In her notebook entries and drawings of the late '60s you begin to sense a real frustration with the abstract paintings, what to do with them, an almost cruel self-criticality. Was there a break then from the paintings to the conceptual work?

DR: There is no real break; she's making the two kinds of work at the same time. And if she hadn't lost her studio, she might have continued to make paintings--there was no conceptual reason not to. They were connected in many ways. In *Dialogue Piece*, 1969, she invited different people to come to her studio and talk to her. In the paintings, those same impulses of how to have an honest interaction with another person went into the relationship between the work and the viewer.

KS: Instead of relating to a painting as if it were a person, she's relating directly to a person, and that's the artwork. She also made work about larger social relations, like *General Strike*.

DR: She announced *General Strike* on February 8, 1969, and two months later made a related statement at the Art Workers' Coalition. She said from that point forward she would only do things that involved "total personal and public revolution," and that didn't mean stopping painting, but she withdrew from commercial shows, like one organized by Richard Bellamy at Goldowsky Gallery. And, of course, Bellamy was one of the most adventurous, least commercial gallerists, making Lozano's decision all the more extreme.

KS: That's interesting now, because people are always talking about rampant careerism and the dominance of the market today compared to the '70s. She seems to have been unusually sensitive to these problems.

DR: Yes, in strikingly radical ways. She stopped going to meetings of the Art Workers' Coalition after this statement. She said she wasn't an art worker, but an art dreamer. They weren't radical enough for her, in that they weren't artistic enough. She wanted the two things to come together--a very difficult position to sustain.

KS: Some people have said that these later conceptual works are an excuse for her to have psychological problems and call it art. How much do you think her personal psychology enters into this work?

DR: It's hard for me to talk about her psychological situation because I didn't know her very well. I know she was very intense and troubled. I find it doesn't interfere with the art, but enhances it--she can thematize and integrate into her art what she's trying to deal with in her life.

KS: I think a lot of people know her by that last piece (which began in August 1971) where she stopped speaking to women. It started out as a month-long project, and then continued to the end of her life, twenty-

some years later. That's the work that all the obituaries spoke about, and it's so puzzling.

DR: I view it as a self-destructive way of dealing with a very real situation: Women didn't have any power in the art world then, so she decided to just deal with the men, who did have the power. It points up that issue. But it's masochistic also, because she couldn't form dialogues with other women and missed out on the feminist movement of the '70s, when women in the art world did gain power by engaging and supporting each other.

KS: Going back to painting, there has been a recent academic vogue for non-compositional painting like Lozano's, including a lot of French painting. Why do you think this is going on now?

DR: I didn't realize that was happening--that's terrific. I think because it was ignored, because the development of painting was ignored, it was cut off. People thought that after Pollock, that was the end of non-compositional painting, that there was nothing left to do. I think it's very clear that the legacy from Pollock and Newman can continue.

KS: So the neo-expressionist painting of the '80s was a red herring for painting?

DR: Yes, a false revival. To really revive painting you need to go back and look at this historical rupture of the late '60s and early '70s, and then move on from there.

KS: How do you explain this absence--why is it left out of the discussion of art in the '60s and '70s?

DR: I think there are a few reasons. One is art-world politics: There were artists who had been painters who had turned to sculpture, and they wanted to focus on sculpture or specific objects, and their view became predominant. I think it was more of a polemical view than anything to do with the nature of painting. Also, Greenberg's formalist aesthetics was extremely limited and couldn't support the more advanced forms of painting emerging then. It's what often happens to advanced or experimental painting--it's attacked by the people who are conservative and don't like changes in painting, and, from the opposite side, by those who don't like any kind of painting, assuming it's all conservative. Also, a number of the most important practitioners were women. It was OK for women to do variations on a style, but to invent and propel the direction of painting was too much.

KS: Where do we go from Lozano, Humphrey, Baer, etc.?

DR: Mary Heilmann, Joan Snyder, Alan Shields, Elizabeth Murray, and Guy Goodwin all learned from that slightly older generation, took some of these innovations and incorporated them into a flat structure.

KS: And where does this leave us now, with regard to younger painters?

DR: The young California painters like Ingrid Calame, Monique Prieto, Laura Owens, and Steven Hull; in New York, Pam Fraser, Ruth Root, Elizabeth Cooper. Everything is abstract now, even if it's an image, and it can be combined and used in new ways, and a lot of painters are working within that.

KS: It's funny, because Lozano and her generation look so dry and intellectual; they're obviously addressing serious issues, but the work you're talking about today doesn't look serious, it looks fun and light.

DR: Well, maybe these issues are serious and fun. They're about a certain range of human emotion that can be addressed in painting.

KS: How can painting be emotional without being expressionist?

DR: It's one of the strengths of painting that you aren't coerced into having emotions; you decide to have them. It's not like film. I get weepy at some of the most embarrassing movies. I can even get patriotic, and I'm ashamed of myself. But some of those patriotic emotions come from having a sense of community with other people. You can have those kinds of feelings looking at a painting, too, but in a way that's not coerced: You can choose to have them.

California-born artist DAVID REED has been showing his paintings and installations internationally for the past three decades. His current retrospective at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Switzerland, brings together twenty-five years of his output; the exhibition will travel to the Kunstverein Hannover in January. For this issue's special feature devoted to the multifaceted art of painter and Conceptualist Lee Lozano (1930-99), Reed talks with New York-based critic KATY SIEGEL about the artist he first met in the '60s and the work he has long championed. Siegel is assistant professor of contemporary art history and criticism at Hunter College, City University of New York, and a frequent contributor to Artforum. The author of numerous essays and magazine articles, Siegel recently wrote on the art of the '90s for the catalogues accompanying "Public Offerings," at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and "The Americans: New Art" at the Barbican Gallery, London (through December). PHOTO: ROGER LEMOINE (SIEGEL).

SOL LEWITT

BACK IN THE '60S, I used to visit Lee Lozano's studio pretty regularly. On some of these visits, she would present you with three objects--abstract objects, like small cubes--and tell you to arrange them on a tabletop. I remember her doing the "Wave" paintings, which I was very impressed with--and their premise. When they were first shown, everyone agreed it was a major statement. Lee's relative disappearance from the historical records is sort of mysterious; the work was hardly negligible, so it's hard to say why she didn't have more of a career. It was definitely hard to make it as a woman artist, and she herself really withdrew from the

world. The thing about not speaking with women went way beyond an art project. I remember sitting in a restaurant with her once and a waitress came to the table; not only would Lee not talk to her, she would hide her eyes. She had an extreme dislike for the company of women, thought they were evil. When she came to my studio, if my girlfriend opened the door, Lee would turn on her heels, run down the stairs, and be gone. Her wounds were self-inflicted; the withdrawal from the art world and the anti-feminism. Eventually she stopped making artworks altogether. She became a spirit who would appear and then vanish, but her work was saved by friends and those who had faith in her vision.

LUCY LIPPARD

I KNEW LEE LOZANO from around the art world. She showed at the Green Gallery, the best place for young artists in New York, and was a friend of Dick's [Richard Bellamy]. The conceptual work was much more my thing, so I got to know her better around '66 or '67; she was up the street from me when I lived on Grand Street. It must have been around 1971 that I lent her a copy of my essay collection *Changing*, and when she returned it, the book was full of little marks. One read, "a footnote is a legend"-you had to pause a second a figure out she meant "leg end." Lee had a nice sense of language. She wasn't precisely an intellectual, but she was very thoughtful, and her work was more personal than that of the guys, who were still mostly Minimal. Her paintings had all the things Donald Judd didn't want: color and shape and brushstrokes. They were marvelous, but they didn't fit in any movement, and people like me were not very interested in painting. Lee was always a figure who slipped between stools. But I don't know if she would have ever fit into anything anyway--even her conceptual work looked extreme compared with other art at the time. A tremendous number of people were thinking about how to get art out of the commodity market, and *General Strike* belonged to that milieu. But Lee was extraordinarily intense, one of the first, if not the first person (along with Ian Wilson) who did the life-as-art thing. The kind of things other people did as art, she really did as life--and it took us a while to figure that out.

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