

## EDITORIAL

What started with the question, "How do artists portray themselves to the world?" has throughout the past year and a half in discussion with the women represented in PERSONA given way to a more nuanced set of investigations – in short, artists and writers navigating their way between interior and exterior fields. A persona is a mirrored self, something that simultaneously reflects and obscures, and it is the imbued qualities of this reflective shift that many of the writings here touch upon.

PERSONA is the second magazine in a series of periodicals that have evolved in response to the questions raised by female artists who took part in a series of meetings entitled "A conversation to know if there is a conversation to be had." The first magazine, titled LABOUR and published in 2011, addressed the question of "women's work" – using the lens of the feminist critique of unpaid labor to look at the contemporary condition of the artist – one of the more explicit topics in the "conversations." A more implicit theme throughout many of the meetings was the topic of self-presentation, performance, and the face at the front of the art "work."

Throughout the process of compiling, it became evident that at the heart of the publication are the two seemingly unconnected themes of embarrassment and refusal, which in this context I believe serve to expand our understanding of the persona of the artist. Let your ride begin through the towering public sculpture Mae West on a journey to meet a number of characters often in reflection of or reflecting on other characters and the radical possibilities of these meetings – in friendship, in admiration, in desire, in remembrance, and in candor.

Melissa Gordon, 2013

## COLOPHON

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## CONTENTS

- 2 Gina Mekka  
– Gina Ashcraft
- 7 Press as Library  
– Isla Leaver-Yap
- 8 The Latest Fashion  
– Audrey Reynolds
- 14 In Friendship/The Company We Keep  
– Céline Condorelli, Avery F. Gordon
- 21 Letter to Marisa Merz  
– Jen Liu
- 27 Eau de Cologne
- 31 The Desire to Desire is Also a Desire  
– Sabeth Buchmann, Josephine Pryde
- 34 Foray  
– Audrey Reynolds
- 40 Marie Lund
- 42 Frau Mit Viel Zeit  
– Eva Kenny
- 46 Chris Kraus interviewed by Alison Carr
- 52 Somebody Else  
– Karolin Meunier
- 54 The 32 Things You Need to Know About Embarrassment  
– Eva Kenny
- 58 Mater  
– Audrey Reynolds
- 60 Quitting  
– Alexander Koch, Stephen Wright
- 64 Drop Outs: Slackers, Sociopaths and Social Workers  
– Marina Vishmidt, Melissa Gordon
- 71 Winifred Knights  
– Nadia Hebson
- 78 Three Embarrassing Things  
– Daria Martin
- 85 A Motivated History  
– Sue Tate
- 92 The Nature of Elitism  
– Jo Freeman

Back inside cover: Elisabeth Subrin on Shulamith Firestone

Cover image: Postcard of Princess Gina of Lichtenstein from the special edition of the original collective sex pulp novel **Naked Came the \*\*\*\*** published on the occasion of the Rita McBride retrospective exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Lichtenstein in the year 2000. The postcard was placed in the pages of the paperback as if someone had left it there. The postcard came with a postmarked stamp from the Principality of Lichtenstein, it was sent to Rita McBride by Gina Ashcraft and has been in the possession of Melissa Gordon since 2003. (Photo: J.A. Slominski)

# PERSONA — ISSUE 2

# DROP OUTS:

**Melissa Gordon:** We began talking about the dropout while developing the contents of PERSONA, and originally our discussion developed because I wanted to print the Cady Noland essay "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil" in the magazine as it is a text I've been fascinated with for a couple years now.

**Marina Vishmidt:** I think that's a good place for us to start, because "Towards a Metalanguage of Evil" was a point of entry for you into these questions about dropping out, and also because I was not so familiar with Cady Noland's work until you told me about it. I was coming to the topic from a more general reflection on what it means to drop out and it helps that you are coming from somewhere more specific. So, from our previous conversations, it seems another advantage of starting with that text is that it raises questions about value and cynicism.

**MG:** I found the essay while looking through old Documenta catalogs, and having known and respected Noland's work but knowing that representations of it are rare, and writing by her even rarer, I felt like I had found a treasure. And when I read it

I thought, here is a lost manifesto in art history! After investigating the various myths around Cady Noland's practice, I began to think of the text as a "dropout piece" – a statement of refusal akin to Lee Lozano's "The Dropout Piece" (1970) as it pre-dated Noland's exit of the art world, and seems to deal with the machinations of being an artist. It made me all the more intrigued to learn that Cady Noland currently holds the record for highest amount paid for a piece of art by a female artist.\* So yes, value and cynicism are definitely at stake. It's unfortunate but in keeping that Noland didn't allow us to re-print the essay in PERSONA. In it she states that the text outlines a "meta-game available for use." Throughout, she describes two characters playing the game: one is X, a psychopath, and the other, Y, the person who is the subject of a con or "snow-job." This question of the game is fascinating – I wonder if the dropout as a character is inherently playing at a game. Do you think that artists who have dropped out are performing an artistic gesture, or maybe more radically trying to alter the "game board"? Maybe it's good to talk through other dropouts: You know more about Charlotte Posenenske, another dropout.

# SLACKERS, SOCIOPATHS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN MARINA VISHMIDT AND MELISSA GORDON

MV: Well, she went in a more lateral direction, so rather than making a kind of gesture of “I’m leaving the art world,” she just left and went to study industrial sociology – she made a decision to concentrate on activism.

MG: So do you think her drop out didn’t embody a critique of the art world? Leaving the sphere of “social critique” to become a “social worker”?

MV: Well, in a sense it did since she decided that she had reached the limit with what it was possible to do in that world.

MG: So maybe if we can think of Noland’s drop out as a critique of value (a cultivation of value through the adamantly and negatively defined boundaries of authorship that are pertinent now in the lawsuit with Sotheby’s)\*\* – then Posenenske’s action is a critique of the usefulness of an artist/artwork?

MV: Yes, it could be looked at in that way. It was a decisive choice against working in that social and professional milieu, against the only metaphorical possibilities for social action that she was encountering there.

MG: It’s interesting to consider that what Lee Lozano did and what Cady Noland did and what Charlotte Posenenske did are all radically different gestures even though they are the same “action.” For me that is what is so fascinating about the dropout: The angle from which you look at it as a viewer shifts the role of the artist. It’s almost a prism through which to view an artist, or a prism that the artist positions around them.

MV: So perhaps what makes it the same “action” is that all three are staging an exit from the same “place” – the art world; this hypothetical site is what lends these different gestures the consistency of an action.

\* Cady Noland’s “Oozewald” (1989), was sold for \$6.6 million in November 2011, the top price for a living woman artist as of this writing.

\*\* As of June 27, 2013, *Art in America* reported that Sotheby’s, representing a Noland in dispute, has won a claim to remove an artwork from sale by invoking the Visual Artists Rights Act of 1990.

(artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/news/2013-06-27/sothebys-wins-in-dispute-with-jancou-gallery-over-cady-noland-artwork-/)

But what kind of action does “dropping out” constitute? Does the artist leave while remaining an artist? Does the artist stop being an artist or does the artist just disappear off the radar? If art is an institution, then are the two somehow equivalent rather than alternatives?

MG: Exactly. The editorial for this magazine is on mirrors, because I feel that this idea of the thing that obscures and reflects is very much to do with what you show to the world, your physical presence and how you choose to present yourself is as much something that obscures, reflects, and presents at the same time.

MV: That’s the idea of the persona isn’t it?

MG: Yes, and I feel that position becomes very clear or crystallized in the object of the dropout. At first it appears that dropping out is a very cynical act but now I wonder if it is actually cynical at all.

MV: Yes, I am not sure whether it is an act that can mainly be defined by cynicism. What it means for a woman artist to drop out is different anyway from a kind of generic “dropping out” from the art world as an abstract gesture (though no doubt it is always performed in very concrete and disparate circumstances). From the perspective of an art practice, dropping out accentuates the invisibility of the woman artist. It is like a double invisibility, doubled in the performance of that which is anyway the case. I think maybe by cynicism, we mean something more like seeing dropping out as a tool that gets deployed when you disappear while remaining within the art world in some manner, i.e. neither by disappearing completely nor by appearing somewhere else, like Charlotte Posenenske. But continuing to be present somehow, in a way that accentuates your value and mystery. At the same time it is a refusal to fully articulate your presence, while you are also refusing to explicitly situate your absence, and this is more like the Cady Noland case. So I think cynicism is maybe a modality that comes into play there but it would be hard to reduce it to that.

MG: Your description of the action as a tool points to a usefulness in it. I guess it’s good to remember that dropping out happens all the time – it’s a strong undercurrent in the art world. It is not only a decision – maybe it’s a field that exists, that it’s almost a medium rather than an act. That’s maybe extreme to call it a medium!

MV: So to drop out becomes indistinguishable from what would otherwise be identified as failure?

MG: I saw an interesting talk by Lisa Le Feuvre on failure (which she gave in front of a Buster Keaton film), where she was discussing the condition of failing as a determined process: letting things go or letting things happen, letting things take over, and so failure starts to become a conditional, mutable term in relation to value. So for an artist to declare that they have failed means that they are already in a position of power – power in relation to the frame of failure. The dropout as a character must touch on this power dynamic. If failure is a normal condition that people are subjected to, the dropout becomes an owned failure.

MV: Yes, exactly, it’s a way of wresting back control over the meaning of failure and re-casting it in terms of a purposeful gesture, so that it becomes part of an *oeuvre*, not the fading of an *oeuvre* or its abrupt disappearance. In that sense, it becomes immaterial whether or not there is a failure, that becomes just one of the glances the “dropout” prism can enable the observer to have. It’s a performative elision of failure and success, control and relinquishing control. I think what you’re saying about a field is important – now I’m thinking about a field versus a gesture and does the gesture become visible within the field or within the larger field of the art world? Does it become visible as something, does the field of dropping out become noticed, rather than dropping out that manages to set itself out from the field, as a kind of gesture, or monument, a perceptible void. Darkness visible – something that can be historicized or categorized as the drop out, as Alexander Koch writes about.

MG: I don’t agree with Koch’s definition of certain dropouts as ‘unproductive’, it places things on a scale.

MV: Big failure.

MG: Yeah, if you're going to do it, fail big!

MV: On the other hand it can be too big to fail, meaning no matter what you do it will be somewhat sympathetically assessed, like if you're Anselm Kiefer. Or Tracey Emin.

MG: That's interesting! Isn't that a real condition in the art world – that things become out of touch and stop being pertinent to the incessantly hyper-contemporary art world – is that in itself a drop out? Dropping out through excessive success?

MV: So with the discussion of the dropout, there is also, or primarily, a taxonomic quandary, which is how the gesture of dropping out both redefines the field but also how the field is constantly mutating so it becomes harder to recognize when someone is dropping out because anything can be done as art, as art is endlessly permissive now by definition.

So then it becomes a matter of whether you do whatever it is that you do, which is not necessarily recognizable as art, in the social and categorical milieu of art. Or whether you make a point of saying that's it, I'm leaving art and... So it does come back to the leaving behind of the social realm, which is the decisive attribute of the "dropout"? It doesn't seem that simply ceasing to "make" art is a sufficient condition for it. You have to announce it, however broad or narrow the cast of your transmission. Because of course you can stay in the art world and not do anything for twenty years if you're rich and famous. Obviously with Cady Noland you can leave and your work continues to exist.

MG: But if you're not [famous] then you just leave and nobody cares.

MV: Nobody knew you were there, nobody knew you left.

MG: But this is why I am attracted to the conundrum of talking about the drop out – making invisibility visible. This was and still is a goal of feminist art historians – to pull out the forgotten history of

women artists. I don't think the dropout is at odds with this, but maybe as a gesture it is trying to activate something, or playing a long game with the knowledge that women artists traditionally have been forgotten due to lack of institutional backing and context. Back to the question of value: when someone drops out, or changes path, they have all this work, these objects or ideas that are left behind, and the place these objects find themselves in and the company they keep (if not in a rubbish heap) becomes more important than the artist themselves, which is the ultimately important thing while the artist is "present."

MV: Sure, because the art world works more on the principles of not so much supply and demand but scarcity. Value is assigned with regard to scarcity, and that is also in terms of research and presentation ("archival turns"), not even directly the circulation of works in the art market.

MG: That is definitely one value system. I think the other side is a speculative market that invests in the character of the [living] artist.

MV: Yes, that seems to be about building a relationship to the artwork in the market that is couched in terms of passion or interest which and that is what lends value to that relationship to an object or to an archive and that's how it becomes property, through this discourse of passion.

MG: That's really interesting.

MV: I was thinking of a recent artist's feature film set in LA, documenting how a particular non-art site of identity performance became part of a milieu of queer politics. At one point in the film there's an incident when the bar is represented in the lifestyle supplement in the paper in an objectionable way, and the filmmaker goes to this journalist's house and says how dare you write this and you're endangering all these people as well as being disrespectful. So there's a kind of loving possessiveness there, protectiveness, but that's also open to question on the basis of class, and capital, however you perceive the latter term operating here. There's the consideration of the frame



of representations – it's an ambitious project with high production values and good circuits of distribution – so it's like the kind of love or the kind of connection that you build becomes part of your ability to mobilize that through the privilege that you already possess. Though I'm not that interested in this discourse of privilege because I think it's politically disabling.

MG: Sure, like English class kind of privilege?

MV: I'm thinking more of the American scenario of privilege politics – as in, if you're speaking from a position of privilege but I'm speaking from a position of this other privilege, and this has to be clarified before anything else. Anyway, that got me thinking about the economic dimension of passion, how passion is convertible into property.

MG: Do you mean the passion the artist invests in the work?

MV: I mean you have a commitment that you are in a position to capitalize and what it is you have a commitment to might not, I guess. Whether it's an object, or whether it's a dead artist or whether it's a "community," these all become variable in a property market, since the market – commercial or institutional – is structured by the mysterious "properties" of authorship, however dead, that is constantly reiterated to be in the sphere of discourse running parallel to those valuations.

MG: This links back to the question of control and ownership that is so pertinent in the Noland essay, as well as to many acts of refusal and opting out. Noland's examination of the psychopath seems to be interested in games and power dynamics – control of the camera and control of image dissemination – this is the role of the sociopath, which I think she is making a parallel with to the larger art world. The unraveling of the Noland power play is like a whirlpool sucking everything down with it. A re-valuation is created by relentless refusal to "do" or to "play." I wonder how this can help unpack the issues at stake in the value of women's art works in their relation to women's "work."

MV: I like the devaluation/revaluation of labor hypothesis in the gesture of "dropping out," both voluntary and involuntary, as you point out. How you can disappear from the scene in order to enhance your control over the value of your work, by thematizing or turning into a gesture what is experienced as a defeat or lack of further possibility, a caesura or stop in other circumstances, the circumstances that affect women artists most and for unmistakable reasons. So there is a negation of the conditions of production – if removing oneself can be considered a negation, at least on an individual level – and then a re-investment, both that the art world makes in you and that you make in it, in Cady Noland's case as "part" of her practice, or in someone like Lee Lozano after her death. Tacking between the practices of negation by women artists shows a landscape of work-labor.

MG: Yes we're back to the lens of the dropout and the angle it puts on "laboring." I think it's also important to point out that what we are speaking about stands opposed to the myth of the male artist as embodiment of practice (in its most obvious form the Kippenberger complex which still lingers) that has become a cliché. Maybe the dropout is the only gesture to fly in the face of the obscenity of professionalization. Or as Kraus says "Real glamor lies in obscurity... the discovery of things that haven't been altered by media glare." When Noland makes the parallel between the psychopath and an aggressive entrepreneur, in 1987, is this not the dark trajectory of the "professionalization" of artists? Frustratingly we come back to a necessity for a "mythic" character – both in the dropout and in the thing it wishes to criticize.

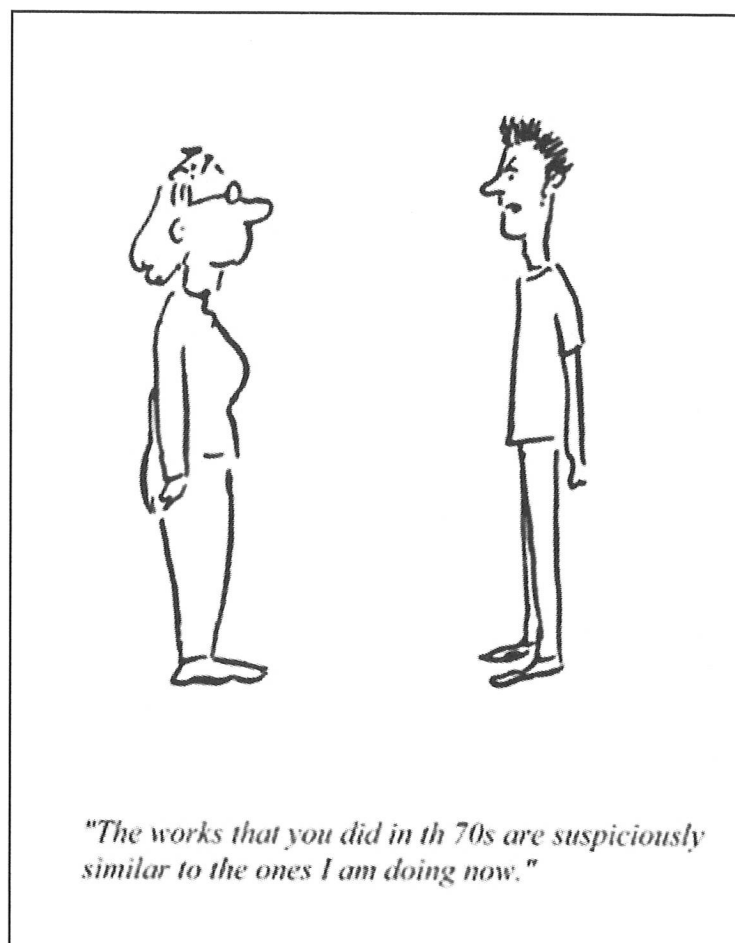
MV: I was looking at the *21 scenes concerning the silence of Art in Ruins* publication [Eva Weinmayr, *21 scenes concerning the silence of Art in Ruins*. London: Occasional Papers, 2010] that I have with me here, which is obviously also very much about the force field established by the vacuum of certain personalities or certain practices – dropping out as a way to achieve mythic status while living without the ignominy of performance. I think this idea of dramatized absence, a gesture of renunciation which can only be

noted as such if undertaken by someone who already has a prestige, against the background of all the unnoticed dropping out (I am reminded here also of Sholette's "dark matter") [Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 2010], a protest against a system of celebrity and commodification which presupposes a system which can register your exit. Fast trip, long drop. Dropping out as taking a position or leaving a position. Dropping out as a legible move in an acknowledged grammar. The physics (what kind of forces are generated in the exit by larger and smaller bodies) and metaphysics, the quantum gravity of the drop.

MG: Yes, if there's no ground to fall onto, falling becomes a performance, dramatized like you say. The question of prestige trails our discussion. More and more I'm interested in the slacker – the 90s casual producer. I wonder if the slacker – someone who actively eschewed mass media, who reveled in being "bored" has been absorbed in the practice of "not" making things, in the practices of artists that came about in the late 90s, Rikrit Tiravanija or Vanessa Beecroft for example, but has the potential to be a more radical position.

MV: That gets into a lot of dense and confusing territory about the relation of art to non-art practices recognized through or as art. But maybe that's a precipice we need to approach if we're talking about value and transvaluation, in dropping out of art but also the re-valuation of "women's work" as art as a second-wave feminist project, and now all kinds of other things that don't explicitly refer to feminism (as in the comic on the right). I don't know.

MG: Maybe like in the comic, a potential problem with defining the dropout as a radical gesture of re-valuation – like the re-discovery of forgotten female artists – is that it has to be "reaped" by someone (i.e., a curator) who controls voice and contextualization. If the second-wave feminist art project was attempting to flatten the value space between art and non-art actions (personal and political), then the historic trajectory of the dropout



becomes both exemplar to that flattened space but also acts like a spanner in the works. It's the *negative act of production* that produces a positive effect.

MV: I think it's important to make distinctions. I was thinking about a discussion at the Truth is Concrete art and activism fest in Graz earlier this year, specifically of Stephen Wright and his reference to "invisible" art practices, or practices with a "low coefficient" of art – the question of how indefinitely and by what mechanism the category "art" is extended to different kinds of activities, so when does that category become inoperative? Is it a matter of intentionality, declaring a "dropout" or a "step out of"? Is the power of the "dropout" to stage or expose the indeterminacy of the "art" field, and then the aspects of value, speculation and, as you've mentioned before, trust, become problematic? And the politics of that somehow come into focus, as though it were simply a "personal" relation between art and capital, and not the class location and relations within art as well, and in relation to other kinds of labor, visible and not.

MG: There is ownership in emptiness. This has been a trend in the past couple of years: the main entrance hall to Documenta XIII with its heavy curatorial presence, Ann Goldstein's first show at the Stedelijk Museum which was mostly empty, the "Invisible" show at the Hayward Gallery. I think the question of trust and institutionalization are imperative, not only in the reading of the dropout, but in determining how things move and causally effect each other in the art world. Who determines that trust is given? This is a question I have been grappling with a lot recently. Who determines the value that trust bestows: it is not problematic because objects are 'unseen', but rather that trust touches on the invisible structures that are at play in the art world, like Jo Freeman talks about in *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*.

MV: With the idea of "invisibility" that is, again, a staging or a pointing to the evacuation of signification that is one of the main conditions for contemporary art: a registration within one particular gesture or set of practices of a larger necessity for art. There is an emptying out of value or a suspension; this is part of art's powerful compulsion as a practice and as an investment too. In the end, it's just funny also to discuss the gesture of "dropping out" of art, since art itself could be seen as one giant zone of sanctioned "dropping out." But like with any zone of exception, it performs "mystic truths" about the rule, as Nauman liked to say.

MG: That is exactly what the dropout stages – like a change in lighting to show the outline or silhouette of what is happening.