

PROSPECTUS

"STORE/FRONT"

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I. IDEAS

A. Living and working:

More than 1.6 million people have been trained as 'professional' artists in the United States since the passing of the G.I. Bill in 1944. Where are they now? Where will you be later? If Lee Lozano's *Dropout Piece* can be considered a seminal work of 20th-century art, it is only because she succeeded in inscribing the true state of affairs for the vast majority of us: we drop out. We drop out, whether we like it or not.

After you are done with your training as a 'professional' artist, you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack, while serving drinks at a New Orleans dive bar. You may find yourself in another part of the world, designing lamps for Olafur Eliasson's Berlin studio. You may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile, driving other people's paintings between Chicago and New York. And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife, building a treehouse for your beautiful kids. And you may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?

And who could blame you? Maybe you imagined yourself being somewhere else. In the studio, for instance. Or chatting at your local coffee shop. With the disappearance of bohemia as a generative space for artistic development sometime in the 1970s, and since the rise—and subsequent marginalization—of the figure of the slacker in the 1990s, ambition has become increasingly bourgeoisified and made universally mandatory. Art is now a rarefied playpen; a gated community. If you can't make it there, you should try to make it anywhere else.

Even for those artists whose dedicated pursuit of their practice in the direction of a particular subject leads them, unintentionally, outside the discourses of art, there is little to redeem their invisibility. In practical terms, if you take on a subject other than art itself, you drop out of art. Even if you become very adept at building treehouses and begin to make them for your neighbors' children, in all likelihood you will be limited to the discourses of woodworking, weatherproofing, and helicopter parenting.

Yet the cruel irony is that the best works of art—like Lee Lozano's piece—approach invisibility. Between 1972 and her death in 1999, most people with whom Lozano interacted were completely unaware that they were witnessing first-hand—or even participating in—one of the key artworks of their century. I say *approach* invisibility, because works like this must meet a minimum threshold of visibility *as art*. This condition may be met only for a select number of people, or even retrospectively (don't worry, there may be hope that your treehouse-building practice will be anthologized after your death), but the work cannot function without it.

It is more accurate to say that the best works are both visible *and* invisible, even if the degrees of visibility and invisibility shift across time, place, and social context. Ninety-nine years after Duchamp's *Fountain*, there is no question that you can call anything art. But the problem now is in the calling. By the time you've announced to the world that you are doing art, you've already ruined it. The challenge is thus to do art and yet manage to shut up about it. The most astute observers recognize this paradox as the core weakness of commercial art, grant art, public art, museum art, performance art, art school art, social practice art, and so on. Sadly many of these people have vested interests in the structures which capitalize on these activities, so they are unlikely to be honest with you.

For artists who want to confront this problem, the question can be phrased as follows: how do you hide without being totally invisible? The answer, it turns out, is surprisingly simple. Do art in plain sight.

B. Obfuscation:

Success depends on continuing to do art, unabated, in full view of anyone who might encounter it. To those with untrained eyes (once known as 'the public'), and even to many of those who have trained ones (who might be described as the 'art public'), this doing of art must blend in with its surroundings. To put it another way, it must employ what anti-surveillance activists refer to as *obfuscation*. If you can imagine the institutional artworld as a data-collecting surveillance régime (and this is not much of a stretch), the aim here is not to avoid the régime—which would be futile—but to interfere with its mechanisms by producing confusing, ambiguous or misleading information. The challenge, then, is to create a structure in which this practice might be sustainably carried on over time.

II. A STORE

A. I propose the running of a store:

A store is a perfect form in which to camouflage artistic activity. Of course, many artists have operated storefronts before (and many artists have simulated storefronts inside art contexts) but these projects invariably turn the 'art' dial up to eleven. What I'm describing is no Ray Gun Manufacturing Company. The goal here is to run a regular store, for regular people. It could be any kind of store, but I suggest a convenience store, which as a form is appropriately unambitious, universal and timeless. Indeed, the convenience store is already a kind of shell for whatever is needed at a local scale. As long as people continue to live in urban environments, something like the convenience store or corner market will always be necessary. Even if 7-Eleven, Walgreens and CVS merge to form a mega-corporation which conspires to purchase every piece of street-level retail real estate in the country, there will always be room for one more store.

The location of the store is important. It should be in a city or town with a complex mix of inhabitants, including some version of an art public. The store's customer base should be localized but somewhat unpredictable. The nature of the store and the merchandise it carries should reflect the needs of the neighborhood as a whole and not the aspirations of the gentrifying class. The running of the store is not a kind of separatist activity, but nor should it be imagined as providing a public service. The medium of commerce is more democratic, less threatening, and less ideologically charged than the medium of charity.

For the artists involved, running a store is relatively easy, requiring little in the way of specialized skill or intellectual effort. Importantly, it does not demand an ambitious careerism, and will thereby provide space for the artists to simultaneously concentrate on the thing they are supposed to be doing: that is, art. It is important to note, however, that while running the store will be entirely coterminous with the doing of art, the running of a good store is much easier to accomplish than the doing of good art.

B. Inside the store:

The running of the store is the doing of art, but there will be no art objects for sale inside the store. The store will not be used as a venue for exhibitions or performances. The store is not an attempt to create an 'alternative art space'. Any kind of interaction or work not explicitly identified as 'art' may happen inside the store, so long as the store continues to successfully function as a store. In its decoration and design, the store should develop its own aesthetic as an independent business over time, and should not attempt to mimic the look and feel of an already existing store. This is not a trompe l'oeil exercise. Nobody wants to go shopping inside Uncanny Valley.

C. Working at the store:

The store will be run by artists as a worker-owned cooperative. These artist-worker-owner-members will share in the profits generated by the business. Working at the store will be repetitious and often boring. Indeed, the store is

intended to produce unstructured yet completely secure and autonomous time for the artist-worker-owner-member. Boredom and idle time are *valuable* byproducts of a retail operation. Inside the store, no artist-worker-owner-member will ever have to look like they're working if there's no work to be done. Of course, even if they are not doing work, they will still be doing art.

III. VISIBILITY

A. Spectatorship:

The store's primary audience does not engage in spectatorship. Its primary audience—i.e. its customer base—engages in usership. It uses the store, like a store, because it is a functioning store. The store should not maintain a website, although it should be prepared for customers to rate and review the business on various online platforms. The store should have a regular-sounding name, and regular hours as per neighborhood demands. The artist-worker-owner-members should refrain from mentioning to customers that art is happening there.

Doing art in plain sight, in the form of running a regular store, is intended to relieve the anxious burden of productivism, while creating the conditions for the continued practice of art. If things go well, there is a possibility that this practice may become meaningful for members of the class of people which cares about art. The store should maintain a healthy indifference toward these people. As a store, the store should be spoken of as a regular store. For those who understand it as the site of art practice, it should be spoken of as with a speakeasy: go there and enjoy yourself, but do not say its name out loud. Unless you are a particular kind of person and you get a particular kind of 'art feeling' at the store, and decide to communicate that feeling to someone else.

Of course, if people who care about art decide that the project is meaningful to them, there is no point in attempting to completely evade participation in the institutional artworld. After all, one day the artists who worked at the store will be dead and someone will probably decide to exhibit the trash they left behind. No, the store should simply keep the institutions at arm's length for as long as possible. Certainly, there should be nothing resembling a 'studio visit'—a curator

in the store should feel about as uncomfortable as a pseudonymous food reviewer in a hot new restaurant trying not to blow their cover.

B. Authorship:

Activity at the store should never be accredited to the name of a single author, or even a group of individual authors. All artist-worker-owner-members are each completely, one hundred per cent, authors of the project. It is also possible that customers of the store may be considered authors, depending on interactions and relationships that develop over time. In any case, with regard to authorship, the store should function just like a firing squad. The deed gets done, but it's always impossible to identify a single person who hit the target.

C. Objecthood:

What's the work? Where's the work? Is *this* a work? Those questions should never be answered by anyone at the store, as this is the top a very slippery slope. In fact, all aspects of the business should be treated with equal intentionality and a consistent attention to detail, so that nothing can be identified as more or less 'artful' than anything else.

If someone from the institutional artworld experiences a certain kind of art feeling and wishes to engage the store in an undertaking labeled as 'art', they should be informed that the only services the store can provide are those of a store. That is to say, the store can sell things to that person. Thus anyone can make an exhibition or presentation of the project simply by purchasing things from the store. No objects should be disseminated that are outside the scope of store activities. In addition to items for sale, all customers are welcome to take with them the small range of complimentary or incidental items available at the store, such as sale fliers, business cards, or receipts.

Since the goal of the store is to enable the sustained practice of art, it is highly likely that no one from the store will be available to assist with any kind of installation, or join in any kind of celebration. The store has business hours to keep, and will not be closing early in time for the opening. But thank you for asking.