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Art as Action

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Lucy Lippard is a canonical figure who held no truck with canons, who disdained art history only to become art history.



Jan van Raay

Lucy Lippard and members of the Art Workers Coalition demonstrating for the creation of an admission-free day at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 1971

Reviewed:

Stuff: Instead of a Memoir

by Lucy R. Lippard
New Village, 143 pp., \$44.95

In the fall of 2022, a few months after the US Supreme Court overturned abortion rights, the art critic, curator, and activist Lucy Lippard spoke at the University of Colorado Boulder, where I teach, about art's response to perilous times. "Until 2016 I thought my generation, especially feminists, had had some successes among our failures," she began. "Seeing so many of them collapse this past year has been a ghastly experience." After the talk, which was met with cheers, Lippard swatted away questions about herself. Artists in the audience took turns at the microphone to pay tribute; one woman

stood up, weeping, to tell Lippard that she had changed her life. Some of the younger attendees, art students, looked puzzled: What, exactly, was her impact on the art world they'd inherited?

When it comes to Lippard—a canonical figure who held no truck with canons, who disdained art history only to become art history—questions of legacy feel even more resonant now. A godmother of conceptual art and a preeminent feminist critic and environmentalist, Lippard shaped the ways in which we think about the contested borderlands of art, identity, and politics, with perception-shifting exhibitions and twenty-odd books of criticism. It's difficult to imagine that art wasn't always seen as deeply intertwined with the social issues of the day, but in the mid-twentieth-century it was unfashionable to talk about art's message or function. Ad Reinhardt's dictum—"Art is art. Everything else is everything else"—was the dominant ethos in criticism: art was a continent all its own, an aesthetic system of forms and styles. Anything seen as instrumentalizing art for political purposes made many people uncomfortable; it was considered philistine to ask what art was "about" or what it was for.

By the mid-1960s, however, politics had become difficult to ignore. Public opinion had turned against the Vietnam War, and civil rights movements were gaining momentum; American imperialism and the social hierarchies governing our institutions, workplaces, and homes were being scrutinized. Many artists—including the left-leaning Reinhardt, who asked Lippard to write the catalog for his solo exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 1966, a year before his death (she also wrote a monograph on him)—reacted against art for art's sake. Cordoning off art from life had begun to marginalize it.

In *Stuff: Instead of a Memoir*, Lippard recalls some of the artistic revolutions of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the years when conceptual art emerged and developed offshoots of land, body, performance, and other art forms, including the activist art movements in which Lippard was an animating force. She uses the furnishings of the small, off-the-grid house she built in a New Mexican village as points of reference, with short sections centered around mementoes and artworks. It is, as its subtitle suggests, a deflection of sorts, what she calls "a tell-very-little memoir." "My mother always said that her worst nightmare was the existence of an afterlife," explains Lippard in the first paragraph of the book. "I agree, so let the chips fall where they may."

Now eighty-six, Lippard has lived in Galisteo, New Mexico, since 1993, one in a tradition of women who fled New York's art scene to live in the desert, most famously Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Martin. It was exile not from art itself—the artists Judy Chicago and Harmony Hammond live nearby; Bruce Nauman and the late Susan

Rothenberg's compound is up the road—but from an art world that in the 1990s, flush with Wall Street money, had moved in a different direction than the one she had fought for.

Lippard is best known for her 1973 book, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, which documented the shift in contemporary art's interest from the creation of precious things to thoughts and actions. "Conceptual art, for me, means work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or 'dematerialized,'" she wrote in the foreword to the book's 1997 reprint. It was a major change of priorities that, fifty years on, has thoroughly permeated contemporary art, though not entirely in the way Lippard had hoped it would. When she compiled *Six Years*, she believed that conceptualism could dismantle art's commodified status and exclusive institutions. In her own work, she blurred art's conventional roles: her critical writing often felt closer to a creative or curatorial project; her activism might now be called social practice, an art form in itself. Her criticism was always evolving—her feminism and environmentalism grew from her involvement in conceptual art and her grasp of its limitations—but she remained steadfast in her insistence that art does mean something, and that none of us is truly objective about it.

Stuff isn't, of course, really about the stuff. As Lippard notes, what she owned of material value she long ago donated to the New Mexico Museum of Art. (In 1998 the museum held an exhibition of Lippard's collection, including Judy Chicago's *Red Flag*, a print depicting a tampon being removed from a vagina. The museum displayed the image with a warning label, to which Lippard added one of her own: "Think for Yourself.") What remains—an assortment of personal photographs, gifts, and souvenirs of travels far-flung and local—is less clutter than totemic assemblage. Lippard cites Nancy Holt's three-page 1971 textual work, *Studio Tour: Daytime*, as a literary precedent, but *Stuff* would not be out of place next to other recent sidelong autobiographies, such as Janet Malcolm's photo-inspired personal essays, *Still Pictures: On Photography and Memory* (2023), or Aisha Sabatini Sloan's annotated photo essay, *Captioning the Archives* (2021), which uses the work of her photographer father, Lester Sloan, in a series of personal reflections on race and culture.

Lippard was born in New York City in 1937 and, as a result of her pediatrician father's career in university administration, grew up in different parts of the South before landing in New Haven, where he was the dean of Yale Medical School. She describes a happy childhood spent horseback riding and reading books in the company of her tiny pet painted turtle, Hercules Ulysses Sir Van Domino Lippard. During the family's summers on Kennebec Point, Maine, she and her parents would sometimes paint together on the beach, with "whiskey bottles of water, a tin box of watercolors, paper thumbtacked to cutting boards."

Rarely, it seems, was Lippard at a loss for words; Lucy the Lip was one of her nicknames. At seventeen, embarking for Smith College, she wrote a note to her twenty-two-year-old self that neatly foregrounds a writerly sensibility: “I hope you’re still an individualist and love to argue and haven’t gotten overly gushy or religious.” Having been praised in a studio art class, she briefly considered becoming an artist instead of a writer: “I brought some paintings home to show my parents. They scrutinized them and said...‘writer.’”

After graduating in 1958, Lippard took a job as a page at the Museum of Modern Art’s library—not the glamorous gallery post she’d hoped for, but there was a lot to be learned from assisting curators with their research. Lippard submitted what she refers to as “sappy” reviews to Hilton Kramer, then the editor of *Arts Magazine*, who advised her to spend more time in the contemporary art world before trying to write about it. A decade older and more conservative, Kramer soon became the chief art critic for *The New York Times* and an adversary of sorts; he later wrote that Lippard could have been a good art historian but that she “fell prey to the radical whirlwind.” Meanwhile, she completed her master’s thesis on Max Ernst—“old but still seductive,” he took her out for a Bloody Mary—and published books on Philip Evergood (1966), Pop Art (1966), Surrealism (1970), and Dadaism (1971). But “by then,” she writes, “I knew that I was far more interested in art that was making history than in history already made.”

It’s hard not to feel envious reading of Lippard’s adventures at the 10th Street galleries—“I was a bundle of energy, never cool, wanting too much to be liked”—or at MoMA, where she became friends with Sol LeWitt, who worked the night desk and lent her French novels. (In 1976 they cofounded the nonprofit art bookstore Printed Matter, which has locations today in Chelsea and the East Village.) Also at MoMA she met Robert Ryman, who worked as a guard and whom she married in 1961. She and Ryman lived in a Lower East Side apartment with a bathtub in the kitchen—she hid her typewriter under the dirty dishes in the tub so that thieves wouldn’t find it—before settling in a Bowery loft, where Ryman mounted a buffalo head they called Bonzo on the wall. Their neighbors included Eva Hesse, who babysat Lippard and Ryman’s son, Ethan, born in 1964.

By the end of the decade Lippard was writing for a half-dozen publications, but she had little interest in issuing thumbs-up or thumbs-down judgments from an exclusive perch; noting her distaste for the term “critic,” she writes, “I describe myself as a writer, activist, and sometime curator. I write about what I like, saving my criticism for capitalism.” After working with the curator Kynaston McShine on a MoMA show that later became, when he took a job at the Jewish Museum, “Primary Structures”—the 1966 exhibition that came to define Minimalism, with its stripped-down, often industrially produced objects by the likes of Donald Judd and Robert Morris—Lippard countered with a show of her own, “Eccentric Abstraction,” at

the Fischbach Gallery, also in 1966. Essentially setting the terms of post-Minimalism, Lippard selected artists with a tinge of the uncanny and sensuous, showcasing the then little-known work of Hesse, as well as Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman, and other difficult-to-classify sculptors whose tactile works softened Minimalist forms.

In 1971 she published *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, writing in the preface, “Criticism, like history, is a form of fiction.... So-called objective criteria always boil down to indefinable subjective prejudices, which are the plagues of writing about the immediate present.” Her own criteria for criticism were “clarity, directness, honesty, lack of pretense and prettiness, even a kind of awkwardness.”

One of the essays collected in *Changing* was her collaboration with John Chandler (an intellectual historian for whom she had left Ryman), originally published in 1968, called the “The Dematerialization of Art.” In it, they identify a crossroads of sorts, a turn in art’s focus to its conceptual content: art as idea, art as action. This change would, they anticipated, place new demands on both viewers and critics. “If the object becomes obsolete, objective distance becomes obsolete,” they write.

Sometime in the near future it may be necessary for the writer to be an artist as well as for the artist to be a writer. There will still be scholars and historians of art, but the contemporary critic may have to choose between a creative originality and explanatory historicism.

Lippard tracked these developments in more depth in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. As an annotated index of an era—and what an era—it quotes from manifestos such as LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967) and Robert Morris’s “Anti-Form” (1968), and cites artworks as wide-ranging as Walter de Maria’s earthworks in the Mojave Desert, Ed Ruscha’s influential “antiphotography” books, and Lee Lozano’s text work “Grass Piece” (1969), for which the artist smoked marijuana for thirty-three days, documenting the experience in a notebook. Some of the works in the book are revolutionary, others feel tediously self-referential, but all were contesting the idea of what art should be. There was exhilarating power in the anarchic chorus of voices that Lippard gathered.

Among the dozens of exhibitions recounted in the book are three of Lippard’s own “numbers shows,” each named for the population of the city in which it took place—proof not only that art could be cheap and ephemeral, but that it could exist outside New York City. (The first, “557,087,” was in Seattle in 1969.) Their catalogs consisted of sets of randomly sorted index cards made by Lippard and the artists she included. Conceptual writing about conceptual art sometimes had the unintended effect of making the art feel less accessible, not more; perusing *Six Years*, one longs for more of Lippard’s voice and synthesis as she makes sense of a chaotic and more innocent time. And by the

time Lippard wrote the book's afterword, she had already begun to question some of her assumptions and inclusions—the fourth and final numbers show, “C. 7,500,” in 1974 in Valencia, California, addressed the relative invisibility of female conceptual artists. She questioned herself again in the catalog accompanying a 2012–2013 show at the Brooklyn Museum, “Materializing *Six Years*: Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art.” But she resisted the impulse to revise, understanding *Six Years* as a document of its moment.

“It becomes clear that today everything, even art, exists in a political situation,” Lippard said in a 1969 interview. “It becomes a matter of artists’ power, of artists achieving enough solidarity so they aren’t at the mercy of a society that doesn’t understand what they are doing.” Galvanized by a trip in 1968 to be on the jury for an art prize in Argentina, where she witnessed the efforts of artists and art collectives to bring visibility to the military dictatorship’s policies, she joined the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) and became an energizing figure within its wide-ranging critiques, often targeting art institutions, symbolic of all that was wrong with the broader culture.

One of her AWC “actions” involved breaking into a trustees’ event at the Metropolitan Museum and releasing cockroaches on the dining table to protest, among other things, its 1969 “Harlem on My Mind” show, which excluded Black artists and the Harlem community. A demonstration protesting the cancellation of the AWC cofounder Hans Haacke’s show at the Guggenheim, which included work that took on slum lords, culminated in a conga line led by the avant-garde choreographer Yvonne Rainer down the museum’s spiral ramp.

The year 1968 marked more private rebellions, too. Divorcing Ryman, Lippard bought a loft without plumbing next to that of Alex and Ada Katz—the “family mansion,” as she refers to it now. Unable to afford child care, she brought Ethan along with her on studio visits. (“When he complained, I told him, ‘This is my life and yours is coming,’” she writes. “One night around age sixteen, Ethan came in stoned, way past curfew, and announced that his life had come.”) *I See/You Mean*, an experimental feminist novel she wrote in the early 1970s, includes as one of its main characters a writer married to an artist; gender politics seep into their arguments. Writing it, Lippard recalls, “brought home to me the fact that I wasn’t one of the boys.”*

Lippard doesn’t recount professional slights in her antimemoir, writing only that she was “vehemently opposed” to the “dictatorial role” Clement Greenberg had in the 1960s art world. Art, of course, has never been a bias-free enterprise, and to pretend otherwise has a way of perpetuating the status quo. By the early 1970s female critics and scholars—including Lippard, Barbara Rose, Rosalind Krauss, and Linda Nochlin—were becoming impossible to ignore. In a 1969

interview Greenberg made dismissive comments about “lady art critics” writing “so much crap about art,” adding that he was appalled that “someone like Miss Lippard can be taken seriously.” Lippard also doesn’t mention the time Greenberg invited her to a party only to pointedly ignore her—punishment, perhaps, for her having publicly challenged him, following a talk at MoMA, to explain what he meant by “quality.”

Lippard threw herself into second-wave feminism, joining the artists Faith Ringgold, Poppy Johnson, and Brenda Miller in 1969 to form the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee, which demanded gender and racial parity in American art exhibitions. Their protests surrounding the 1970 Whitney Annual—projecting images of women’s art on the museum façade, staging a sit-in, and scattering eggs and feminine hygiene products with “50% Women” emblazoned on them inside the galleries—had an impact: the following year, the percentage of women artists included rose from 5 percent to 22 percent. Sharpening institutional critique with Dada-like wit and PR savvy, Lippard helped create a blueprint for future generations of art activism, such as Decolonize This Place—whose protests leading up to the 2019 Whitney Biennial led to the resignation of Warren Kanders, a tear gas producer, from the Whitney board—and Nan Goldin’s PAIN, which has staged “die-ins” at art institutions bearing the name of the Sackler family, the former owners of Purdue Pharma, the producer of OxyContin and other opioids.

For the first time, Lippard began curating women-only exhibitions. Though she liked to point out that quality is subjective, Lippard was, in fact, highly selective; her 1971 show at the Aldrich Museum in Connecticut, “26 Contemporary Women Artists,” included Mary Heilmann, Howardena Pindell, and Adrian Piper, among other now-celebrated names. In 2022 the Aldrich commemorated the show’s fiftieth anniversary with an exhibition that doubled the number of female and nonbinary artists included to fifty-two—a testament to the persistence of the problem.

In a 1971 article for *Art in America*, Lippard traced the exclusion of female artists to artmaking being a “primary function,” while “women are conventionally relegated to the secondary, housekeeping activities such as writing about, exhibiting or caring for the art made by men.” Rectifying this would require dedicated efforts on all fronts. In 1977, in collaboration with a group of writers and artists including Pat Steir and Harmony Hammond, she founded the journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, which ran for sixteen years.

The fact that female artists were far less likely to be funded, shown, or written about wasn’t only dehumanizing to the artists; it was diminishing to art itself. Even—or especially—women who weren’t making overtly political work had a way of complicating conceptual art; a feminist sensibility often meant complexity and nuance. Land art

could be more than making one's mark on the earth with bulldozers; it could be a reframing of landscapes, as in Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973–1976), which Holt positioned to align precisely with the sun during the summer and winter solstice, or even a regeneration of them, like Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982), for which the artist planted and harvested two acres of grain in lower Manhattan, on what would become Battery Park City.

Just as revolutionary as Morris's and Judd's industrially produced “specific objects” were the questions of identity, psychology, and the body taken up by women including Ana Mendieta, Yayoi Kusama, Piper, Pindell, and, of course, Hesse. As Lippard wrote in her 1976 monograph on that pioneering sculptor who fled Nazi Germany as a child and died at thirty-four of a brain tumor:

An integral part of Hesse's work is that certain pleasure in proving oneself against perfection, or subverting the order that runs the outside world by action in one's inside world, in despoiling neat edges and angles with “home-made” or natural procedures that relate back to one's own body, one's own personal experience.

Lippard is disappointingly reticent in *Stuff* about Mendieta, with whom she traveled to the artist's native Cuba in 1981. Mendieta died four years later, following an argument with her husband, the sculptor Carl Andre—she fell or was pushed from a window in their thirty-fourth-story apartment; Andre was subsequently tried and acquitted of her murder. Lippard, who was very close to both—she helped organize Mendieta's memorial service, with Andre in “awkward” attendance—doesn't reflect much on the infamous case, noting only that it has remained “a thorn in feminist flesh”: an understatement, and perhaps a missed opportunity.

By 1993, the year the last issue of *Heresies* was published, Lippard was spending much of her time in New Mexico. She had never entirely left the fray, protesting Reagan-era repression of left-wing movements in El Salvador and Nicaragua in the 1980s, but Galisteo offered her a fresh perspective. “I wanted to broaden my life, ironically by narrowing it down to a tiny community,” she explains. She started the town newsletter, for which she still writes a column, and became a member of its volunteer fire brigade. (She met her current partner, the Marxist social anthropologist Jim Faris, in 1994; he now lives in a retirement community in nearby Santa Fe.)

In some ways she brought the fray to the Southwest. In books that merge cultural history, geography, and art—including two of her best, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (1997) and *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (2013)—Lippard circles the question of what we owe to the places we inhabit. Her most recent show, “Going with the Flow: Art, Actions, and Western Waters,” co-curated with Brandee

Caoba at SITE Santa Fe, ran from April to July 2023; it bridged art with science and history by gathering works that investigated water scarcity. “Artists can make the connections visible,” Lippard writes in the introduction to *The Lure of the Local*. “They can expose the social agendas that have formed the land...rather than merely reflecting some of [its] beauty back into the marketplace or the living room.” The old bromide inviting us to think globally and act locally takes on new meanings when a multinational corporation is fracking down the street, or when petrochemical conglomerates set up shop on your ancestors’ burial grounds and give your mother cancer.

One could argue that art lost its nerve when it became a big shiny business, with its high-priced objects, billionaire donors, and institutions fearful of causing offense. But Lippard hasn’t become a burn-it-all-down cynic. The dialectics of nature and culture have instead made her writing more lyrical and discursive over the years, closer to Rebecca Solnit than to what we typically think of as art criticism. The idea of place, bound as it is to our sense of identity, mythology, and ecology, has become a major theme for artists working under the threat of climate change, including Indigenous artists whose traditions were always attuned to the earth. From the Native American art duo Postcommodity’s sound installations to the London-based collective Forensic Architecture, whose investigations are exhibited in both art biennials and human rights tribunals, many artists today are asking the kinds of questions Lippard did: What kind of impact can art have outside of its usual institutional structures? To what extent can it remedy our obliviousness and inertia?

Gone are the days when all one had to do to form a new political action committee was sit down at a kitchen table with a few friends; art has never felt more scattered, geographically and otherwise. This can be disorienting for those who prefer consensus about art’s aims and expect it to be shown in a New York gallery and judged worthy of attention by a salaried critic. Since the advent of the Internet, we’ve been hearing regularly that art criticism is dead (or “temporarily suspended,” as Jerry Saltz recently declared on a podcast), often from those who pine for an era when cultural authority was less questioningly conferred.

But the only thing near extinction is the traditional art review. Equipping oneself with a critical perspective has become a kind of prerequisite for twenty-first-century life, and Lippard’s approach—forthright, flexible, emerging directly from lived experience—is among the best I know for criticism. “Art in fact is all about choices,” she wrote in 1979, though it might as well have been yesterday. “And choices, in turn, are all about how to use time, the means by which to know more about the connections between art and life, and by doing so, to make art a part of the lives of others.”

A caption in an earlier version of this article gave the wrong location and purpose of the protest.

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- * The novel was reissued in 2021 by New Documents, which will also publish a collection of Lippard's experimental fiction, *Headwaters*, in 2024. ↩

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