Total Eclipse: Lee Lozano's Energy Paintings

Helena Vilalta

On the night of April 12, 1968, New Yorkers were treated to an unusually clear lunar eclipse. Shortly before midnight, a round, full moon entered the earth's shadow. For about an hour, its darkened surface took on a copper glow, as only the longer wavelengths of red and orange light made it through the earth's atmosphere.[1] Among those watching was the artist Lee Lozano, who committed the experience to writing: "During the part of the eclipse when the moon was completely in shadow, my eyes absorbed the moon's 3-dimensional roundness for the first time." "Roundness" held pride of place in her aesthetic vocabulary, as opposed to the "flatness" she loathed in painting. "I hate flatness," she wrote on the night of the eclipse. "It's not just surface roundness that turns me on, it's the feeling of density, mass, weight"[2] (fig.1). A few days later, she would continue: "'Mass' contains the idea of inertia, which contains the idea of acceleration, which contains the idea of movement. The movement of an object of large mass (e.g. the moon) rather than an object of small mass (e.g. a bullet) is exciting to me. The greater the mass, the more monumental the movement. Art does not need to be monumental, but movement (change) does."[3]

The distinction that Lozano was establishing here, between the movement of small and large objects, bullets and celestial bodies, speaks to key developments in her painting around the time she made *No Title* (1967, fig. 2), now in the collection of the Austrian Ludwig Foundation. She jotted these notes down having recently completed a three-year-long series of paintings, begun in 1964 and titled after verbs that denote physical actions. Early works in the series, such as *Ream*, *Spin*, *Veer*, *Cross*, *Ram*, *Peel*, and *Charge* (all 1964), depict close-ups of mechanical parts in motion. Initially, Lozano rendered the solitary screws, pipes, bolts, and drill bits in a

[1] See Robert Reinhold, "Total Lunar Eclipse Seen in Cloudless Skies Here," *New York Times*, April 13, 1968.
[2] Lee Lozano, entry dated April 12, 1968, in *Private Book 1* (New York: Karma, 2016), 18.
[3] Lozano, entry dated May 9, 1968, in *Private Book 1*, 35.

gray palette, but as the series progressed, the forms became increasingly abstract and the chromatic range broadened. Beginning in 1965, she was bolting together differently proportioned panels to create her large-scale paintings. Sometimes these sections delineate sequential fields through which geometric figures pass. In *Lean* (1966, fig. 3), a segment of a cone slants to the right, intersecting the central panel's oblique edges as it traverses the chromatic spectrum from yellow to rusty red. In other paintings in this series, abstract bodies meet or collide across panels. The diagonal cut that bisects the four-meter-long composition *Breach* (1966, fig. 4) traces a space of friction between two gendered forms: a purple-gray cylinder above and a taupe-and-violet half-ring below. Lozano called the forms "agents of speed and violence," intimating that rather than depicting things in motion, she was conveying movement itself.[4] When Bianchini Gallery exhibited a selection of these paintings in November 1966—marking Lozano's first solo presentation in New York—critics commended the artist for compressing, "within a deliberately restricted range of forms, a ferment of energetic perception."[5]

Lozano put an end to this extended series in May 1967, but continued to explore the capacity of painting to render a monumental sense of movement. The specific constraints of her next works included just two hues per painting (a base color and a top color for shading) and the use of uniformly sized, elongated rectangular canvases (each slightly bigger than a doorframe). Importantly, as well, from spring 1967 until she abandoned painting in 1970, she would depict curved lines only. As she put it: "In physics, all straight lines are really curved if you extend them far enough. And if you've been doing straight lines for a while, the next thing is to try curves. Where else is there to go but all the way around?"[6] Five paintings from this new body of work (all *No Title*, 1967, fig. 5) were shown in 1968 at the

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[4] Jill Johnston, "Lee Lozano, Green Gallery, 1965," in *Lee Lozano: Win First Don't Last Win Last Don't Care*, ed. Adam Szymczyk (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel; Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2006), 69. Johnston's text was commissioned for an unrealized exhibition of Lozano's work at the Green Gallery in New York, which folded in 1965.
[5] Adrian Dennis, "Lee Lozano, Bianchini Gallery," *Artforum* 5, no. 5 (January 1967): 60.
[6] Lozano, cited in Corinne Robins, "The Circle in Orbit," *Art in America* 56, no. 6 (November–December 1968): 68.

Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, in a four-person exhibition of New York painting that featured Lozano, Robert Gordon, Robert Ryman, and Robert Stanley. (Lozano and her friends jokingly called the lineup "Three Bobs and One Lee."[7]) Lozano gave Bill Leonard, the Center's director, precise instructions to hang the paintings in two groupings: three paintings of cylinders with curved edges; and two paintings of semicircles.[8]

The latter pair included the work now with the Austrian Ludwig Foundation, in which circular emanations radiate out of a pale gray-green semicircle perched at the upper right of the vertically oriented canvas. Directional brushstrokes in the same base color trace concentric circles around the semicircle's outline, extending all the way to the bottom of the painting. Lozano shaded the semicircle by superimposing wet-on-wet brushstrokes of ultramarine (the top color), raking the gray-green underlayer with a bristle brush to produce the surface's finely grooved texture. But the illusion of volume is so subtle that whether the implied three-dimensional surface is convex or concave remains ambiguous: the viewer might see it as a section of a torus, or, alternately, as a passage leading toward a central opening. The painting's companion piece for the Cincinnati exhibition is reproduced in a 1968 issue of *Art in America* (fig. 6), though its present location is unknown.[9] The photograph shows a semicircle in light gray centered at the bottom of the canvas (its shorter width) and shaded in rusty ocher.[10] Here, too, the directional application of paint suggests

[7] Perry Brandston, stepson of Robert Stanley, email to the author, March 8, 2025.
[8] Lozano, notes for the exhibition "Gordon Lozano Ryman Stanley," c. 1968, archive of the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati.
[9] Robins, "The Circle in Orbit," 68.
[10] Robins, "The Circle in Orbit," 68. Lozano sent Sigrid Byers, Assistant Editor at *Art in America*, samples from the two batches of paint she mixed for the painting, presumably to ensure that the color reproduction matched the original hues. To produce the light gray and rusty ocher in this painting, she used the same brand of iron oxide oil paint that she would later use in her *Wave* paintings. Lozano, letter to Sigrid Byers, 18 June 1968, acquisition file for Lee Lozano's *No Title* (1967), mumok–Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna.

ripples emanating from a round shape, though instead of tracing progressively larger, concentric arcs, they trace parallel arcs moving upwards.[11]

The reproduction appears in critic Corinne Robins's article "The Circle in Orbit," which features statements by ten contemporary American artists who were turning to the circle as "a way to reflect on their own world, which is fast moving, fragmented, flooded with illusion—and which they would somehow like to see as whole and complete."[12] In her statement, however, Lozano emphasized her interest in endlessness rather than wholeness; she was fragmenting the circle, she noted, to encourage viewers to extend its radiating energy beyond the canvas.[13] Echoing her own reflections on the roundness of the eclipsed moon, she rejected both flatness in painting and the idea of the canvas as a boundary: "I felt all I had to do is create a small part of the circle because the quality of illusionism in painting is what intrigues me—how far I must go to complete an idea. For me, each painting is part of a monumental form, so that all my paintings are just details of a form that can be extended to infinity or a point in infinity."[14]

This idea was manifested in the unusual installation layout of her paintings within the Cincinnati exhibition. In a letter, Lozano encouraged Leonard to display the canvases in "various combinations of horizontal and vertical" orientations so that they would "play off each other, that is, so that the forms sort of flow into each other." A diagram at the bottom of the page illustrates the painting in the collection of the Austrian Ludwig Foundation hung horizontally to form a right angle with its pendant piece, which is how the two works were finally displayed in Cincinnati (fig. 7).[15] In

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[11] Two other paintings that Lozano showed in Cincinnati are also based on this distinction. They each depict a cylinder that bends at both ends of the canvas; in one canvas, the arcs are concentric, while in the other, they are parallel.
[12] Robins, "The Circle in Orbit," 62.
[13] The painter David Reed has remarked that Lozano turned the post-War interest in wholeness "into a more general concept of having a whole *life* or experience" not "contained by the edges of the frame." David Reed and Katy Siegel, "Making Waves," *Artforum* 40, no. 2 (October 2001): 125.
[14] Lozano, in Robins, "The Circle in Orbit," 68.
[15] Lozano implied this was the final layout for the installation in a letter to Bill Leonard dated August 2, 1968, archive of the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati. At mumok,

suggesting that a ripple of energy could flow from one canvas to another, Lozano was implicitly modeling the paintings' display on the motif of the wave form—the motif that would occupy her for the last three years of her painting career, as she completed her extraordinary series of eleven *Wave* canvases (1967–70, fig. 8). For this final tour de force, presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970, Lozano would work within the same constraints—curved lines, uniformly sized canvases, two colors—to depict undulating bands spanning the length of vertical canvases. The progressively increasing wave frequencies embody her desire to paint a form extending to infinity like a ripple of "energy . . . not contained by the edges of the canvas."[16]

In naming the series, Lozano cycled through loose synonyms, such as "bump," "undulation," "ripple," "kink," and "pulse," before she eventually settled on "wave," a term that resonated with a broad interest, among artists of the period, in the transmission and propagation of energy.[17] Robins's article notes how "art now strenuously insists that it is a relational experience, and the tension between the environment and the object has become an increasingly important condition of the work."[18] She illustrated this idea with a wall sculpture by Lozano's friend Richard Serra, *Two Cuts* (1967), a piece of vulcanized rubber twice incised so that the rubber droops onto the floor in "slumping circular forms."[19] This expanded notion of process, which the art historian James Nisbet terms "energetic materialism," occupied other artists in Lozano's circle too.[20] In their critical writings of the late 1960s, for example, Robert Morris and Dan Graham remarked on the ways art was being shaped by

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where the painting is on permanent loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation, *No title* (1967) is usually hung in a vertical orientation.

[16] Lozano, statement for "The '60s in Abstract: 13 Statements and an Essay," interviews by Maurice Poirier and Jane Necol, *Art in America* 71, no. 9 (October 1983): 135.

[17] These terms appear in a study dated December 5, 1967; the first study for the series is dated November 28, 1967. Both are in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, along with the eleven paintings of the *Wave* series.

[18] Robins, "The Circle in Orbit," 62.

[19] Robins, "The Circle in Orbit," 66.

[20] James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 150.

environmental forces beyond the artist's conscious control, whether gravity, radiation, or audio feedback.[21]

In Lozano's *Wave* series, the concern with "energetic materialism" is inflected by her sustained interest in quantum physics. As her attention shifted from the movement of everyday objects to the cosmic energy of celestial bodies—remarked upon in her observations on the eclipse—her painting turned away from the depiction of human-centered motion to the representation of something like subatomic vibrations. Across the first ten *Wave* paintings, the frequency of the ripples depicted on each canvas increases gradually as the series runs through all the even factors of the number ninety-six (the longer measurement, in inches, of each rectangular canvas).[22] This mathematical progression from lower to higher frequencies was also a progression from low to high intensity, as suggested by the display of a diagram of the electromagnetic spectrum (fig. 9) alongside the *Wave* series at Lozano's 1970 Whitney exhibition. (The frequency of electromagnetic waves is directly proportional to the photon energy they carry—low-frequency radio waves have longer wavelengths and transfer less energy than the powerful gamma rays produced by nuclear fission.) After reaching the logical end of the series at the painting *96-Wave*, however, Lozano added a final, unpainted canvas, *192-Wave*, which bears just two flickering graphite lines. Jo Applin has aptly called it an "irritant"; that is, an outlier in the series's numerical system, and, even more fundamentally, a deliberate short-circuiting of logic.[23] In this light, the last unpainted canvas appears as a cipher for the surfeit of energy that painting cannot convey.

Lozano approached the making of the *Wave* series as one might a scientific experiment. She regularly recorded her "findings" in her notebooks, remarking upon

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[21] See Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part IV: Beyond Objects," *Artforum* 7, no. 8 (April 1969): 50–56; and Dan Graham, "Subject Matter," *End Moments* (self-published, 1969). The wave form also appeared in works addressing sonic sine waves by artists in Lozano's circle including Michael Snow and La Monte Young.

[22] The progressive increase in the number of ripples per canvas is indicated in the works' titles, beginning with *2-Wave*, *4-Wave*, *6-Wave*, and so forth. The last work in the series, *192-Wave*, is a multiple of ninety-six.

[23] Jo Applin, *Lee Lozano: Not Working* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 94.

the progression from matter to energy that the paintings convey, and describing how the series "gets more 'real' the longer the wavelength and more 'unreal' (non object-like) the shorter the wavelength."[24] The more intense charge of the later paintings is reflected in the use of color. Painted a deep red, *24-Wave* marks a stark contrast with the brighter and more neutral tones of the first six paintings, all of which have two-color shading, reminiscent of the painting in the collection of the Austrian Ludwig Foundation. The final four painted canvases are monochrome, so that the wave shape flattens, appearing less like sinuous undulations and more like vibrating or pulsating discharges of electrical energy.[25] In the eyes of critic Kasha Linville, in the last two paintings the waves become "visually dematerialized by their dense waviness"; the colors are "shinier, darker," and the surfaces "soft, splotchy."[26] By Lozano's own admission, the color of these last paintings is "decadent." She found that the deep maroon of *48-Wave* and the purplish silver of *96-Wave* gave hints of high-energy color, a literal reference that she usually tried to avoid but this time "just couldn't resist."[27] The decision to do away with two-color shading was in part pragmatic, since the textural application of paint required her to work wet-on-wet over longer, more grueling painting sessions. To paint *96-Wave*, she worked continuously over three days.

In physics, a wave refers to a "period disturbance in a medium or in space" whereby "energy is transferred from one place to another by the vibrations."[28] For Lozano, the energy that the *Wave* series carried from its place of production to its place of reception was akin to a psychic disturbance, or an intensity of feeling not dissimilar to a psychedelic experience. She noted "intensity" and "passion" as, together, a "high form of energy,"[29] and she kept detailed logs of the joints she

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[24] Lozano, entry dated January 1969, *Private Book 1*, 89.
[25] Lozano noted that she stopped adding a second color from *24-Wave* onwards because it became too difficult. Lozano, annotated press release for her exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1970.
[26] Kasha Linville, "Lee Lozano, Whitney Museum," *Artforum* 9, no. 6 (February 1971): 81.
[27] Lozano, "The '60s in Abstract," 103.
[28] *A Dictionary of Physics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019). This definition applies to traveling waves; stationary waves behave differently.
[29] Lozano, *Private Book 8* (New York: Karma, 2021), 180.

smoked while painting, joking that she had "put acid in these paintings, metaphorically."[30] At the Whitney, Lozano insisted on showing the paintings spotlit against black walls to make the point that the *Wave* series was "an attempt to take people out there."[31] Next to them in the gallery were supplementary notes and drawings along with two idiosyncratic props: an unstretched cut-out from a discarded version of the *6-Wave* painting, which was suspended from the ceiling so that visitors could touch it, and a clear plastic box with birthstones and bodily residues such as nail clippings and hair.[32] At the time, Lozano remarked that artists were "bringing more of their personal life into work/publicity."[33] By collecting these organic materials in her loft and framing them as *The Me Pieces*, she was perhaps experimenting with nonrepresentational ways of channeling her embodied experience into her own work.[34] A heavily annotated copy of the exhibition's press release was on display, too, with Lozano's biographical information crossed out and only her date and time of birth offered as her "identity." In its eccentric reference to astrology—or the forecasting of the effects of cosmic energy on a person's life—Lozano's odd reliquary reminded exhibition visitors that the invisible vibrations depicted in the *Wave* series also have bodily effects, just as the growth of hair and nails depends on exposure to UV radiation.

Back in 1968, at the time of the eclipse, Lozano noted that she "yearned to absorb with [her] body the moon's force of gravity and the moon's motion around the earth, and especially the force of earth's gravity exerted on the moon."[35] In 1970, when she was working toward the Whitney exhibition, she voiced once again the hope that one day "we would be able to feel with our bodies the laws of physics. As

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[30] Lozano, notes on loose-leaf graph paper, 1969–70.
[31] Lozano, letter to Robert Doty, May 7, 1970, Marcia Tucker Papers, 1918–2007, bulk 1957–2005, Series I.A. Box 1, folder 12, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
[32] Lozano's use of a clear plastic box to store and display these bodily scraps echoes the use of similar containers in Fluxus multiples. See Natilee Harren, "Fluxus and the Transitional Commodity," *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (2016): 44–69.
[33] Lozano, entry dated February 17, 1970, *Private Book 7*.
[34] Lozano not only collected eyelashes, she also smoked them "as offering to Gods" and, in return, asked for "grass, love, $. Relinquish fame, power." Lozano, *Private Book 8*, 192.
[35] Lozano, entry dated April 12, 1968, *Private Book 1*, 18.

supersensitivity increases, why not? Feel gravity waves, feel the mathematical relation between matter & energy."[36] By then, however, she was less certain about the capacity of painting to convey this cosmic sense of motion, change, and transformation. She painted many of the canvases in the *Wave* series while immersed in what she called her "Life-Art" practice: a series of instructional scores begun in the spring of 1969, in which she set tasks for herself and followed up with recorded observations of their effects on her life and on those around her. As was the case with other artists in her circle, Lozano's turn to conceptual art was sparked by her frustration with the institutional art world and its legitimation of a corrupt political system.[37] But, for Lozano, the "Life-Art pieces" were also an effort at deconditioning. They were fueled by the belief that the art system was not exclusively sited in museums and galleries, but also internalized by artists.[38] Challenging it required changing subjectivity.

Leaning against the walls of her loft between April and December 1969, the *Wave* paintings were silent witnesses to Lozano's *Dialogue Piece*, a score that prompted her to invite friends and acquaintances to her apartment for the sole purpose of having a conversation, a free and even "joyous" exchange of ideas among artist peers. At its most ambitious, it was an attempt to replace the economy of scarcity prevalent in the art world with one of abundance, in the hope of nurturing a more equitable artistic community. To counter relations of ownership and rivalry, Lozano told herself to "deluge [her artist friends] with information. Douse them with info like you'd throw a bucketful of water."[39] Information, here, is a cognate of the

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[36] Lozano, entry dated March 12, 1970, *Private Book 8*, 14.

[37] For a representative sample of artists' frustration with the institutional art system in late 1960s New York, see Art Workers' Coalition, "Open Hearing" (self-published, 1969), available at https://primaryinformation.org/product/art-workers-coalition-open-hearing/.

[38] Lozano's insights anticipate Andrea Fraser's argument that institutions are embodied by artists rather than being external to them. See Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44, no.1 (September 2005): 105.

[39] Lozano, entry dated June 1, 1969, in *Private Book 2* (New York: Karma, 2017), 62. On the erotic implications of Lozano's analogy between information and water, see Helena Vilalta, "Lee Lozano's Erotics of Information," in *Lee Lozano: Slip Slide Splice* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2018), 56–69.

energy flows depicted in the *Wave* series: it is code for the sharing and exchange of art ideas, but more broadly it is a way of describing—and directly intervening in—the affective and intellectual bonds binding a community together.

And yet, by the time *Dialogue Piece* came to an end, Lozano's ambition to foster freer exchanges of ideas had been "wiped out," together with "the goal of the sixties."[40] The picture that emerges from her notes on *Dialogue Piece* is one of information coveted and traded, often withheld and rarely gifted. "Few dialogues turned out to be joyous, or even social. Some were dull, some were nightmares of tension or discomfort," she noted.[41] Whereas initially Lozano had understood her "life-situation-art & painting" as complementary in the construction of a "high-information field/system,"[42] this hope was unraveling by April 1970, when she wrote *Dropout Piece*: a score that aimed at the "destruction (or at least complete understanding) of powerful emotional habits," as well as the determination to "fight programming to work, to ceaselessly make $, to feed Daddy his ret'n, to achieve, to compete, to win."[43] This impulse also led to the puncture, if not total destruction, of some of her works from 1967, made in the period of transition between her paintings of abstracted mechanical parts and then waves.

Shortly after writing *Dropout Piece*, Lozano sent one of the paintings she had exhibited in Cincinnati to a group exhibition at the Reese Palley Gallery in San Francisco—only this time with a string of holes cut out to bisect the central arched band in the original painting.[44] She retitled the work *Punch, Peek & Feel* (fig. 9), which suggests that she wanted viewers to engage with it not just as visual surface

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[40] Lozano, entry dated December 28, 1969, in *Private Book 5* (New York: Karma, 2018), 45.
[41] Lozano, score for *Dialogue Piece* (1969–70), reproduced in *Lee Lozano: Language Pieces* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery and Hauser & Wirth, 2018).
[42] Lozano, entry dated July 4, 1969, in *Private Book 2*, 89.
[43] Lozano, entries dated April 5 and 24, 1970, in *Private Book 8*, 114, 115 and 186.
[44] *Some New York Painting*, Reese Palley Gallery, San Francisco, May 19–June 27,1970. A note on a loose-leaf sheet identifies the painting as follows: "*Punch, Peek & Feel* with cutout perforations, & waste matter hanging from painting." At present there are no punched-out rounds attached to the painting.

but as part of a surrounding environment: they could peek through the holes to consider the work's materiality, and they might touch its dangling, punched-out rounds. That same month, she drew up a study for cutting a pattern of holes out of one of the two panels of *Stroke* (1967), the last of the 1964–67 paintings she titled after verbs. In the revised work, which she refers to in her notes as *Stroke & Streak* (fig. 10), nine identical sequences of perforations run down the length of the slanted black band of the original, each beginning with three cut-out circles and progressively extending into elongated, rounded rectangles. Lozano stipulated that the painting be hung about half a meter out from the wall, allowing the diagonal perforations to cast "streaks" of light onto the partly shaded wall behind, like negative brushstrokes.[45] While there is no denying the aggression implicit in cutting holes into her earlier paintings, these are structured, calculated interventions that align with and expand on the original compositions rather than shattering them. Perhaps Lozano was reanimating the transitional thrust of her paintings. Whereas in 1967 they had nudged her toward the wave form, she was now piercing them to look for ways to push painting out into the world.

"As soon as I complete the drawing of a circle, I wish to be outside of it." Lozano added this line from Buckminster Fuller to a graphite study for a 1968 four-panel painting of a segmented ring.[46] It was only after she determined to step out of the art world in 1970 that a full circle would appear in her paintings, barely sketched in graphite on a gessoed canvas (fig. 11), like the uncertain lines of *192-Wave*, the last of the *Wave* paintings, which she would draw by the end of that year. The effect is different from the two untitled paintings of 1967 where the semicircle radiates energy. Here, the faint circle is mere ground for the most spectacular of Lozano's hole patterns: two overlaid grids of rounded-square cut-outs, recalling a punch sheet. Back in 1968, she framed her paintings of semicircles as a means of focusing on

[45] These instructions appear along with the revised title in a study dated April 18, 1970, reproduced in *Lee Lozano: Notebooks 1967–70* (New York: Primary Information and Estate of Lee Lozano, 2009), n.p. For a fascinating discussion of the relation between Lozano's cut-out paintings and her *Dropout Piece*, see Jo Applin, "Cut Out, Drop Out," *American Art* 31, no.1 (Spring 2017): 6–12.

[46] The drawing, dated April 1968, is reproduced in *Lee Lozano: Notebooks 1967–70*, n.p.

"the energy which emanates from the forever conflict in painting between the second dimension of its object-space and the third dimension of its implied space, or … its static solid-matter surface and the passages of movement and time it evokes in the mind."[47] Now, this aspiration to roundness had been turned inside out; the only passage implied in this punctured circle is an exit from painting. Total eclipse.

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[47] Lozano, "From thoughts formed on May 11, 68," in *Private Book 1*, 44.