

Art in America

Russeth, Andrew: *Liz Larner: Unstill Life*

22 December 2021

[Home](#) | [Art in America](#) | [Features](#)

# LIZ LARNER: UNSTILL LIFE

By [Andrew Russeth](#)  December 22, 2021 11:18am

[f](#) [t](#) [t](#) [p](#) [r](#) [in](#) [w](#) [e](#)

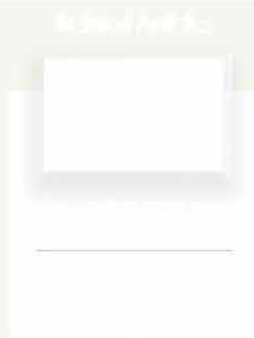


**WHAT IS IN A BREATH?** In 1988, at a group show in Graz, Austria, Liz Larner asked her fellow artists to exhale onto an agar culture that she had prepared in a petri dish, like a medical professional testing for disease. Larner put the work on display, and over the course of the show's run, the accumulated bacteria grew into menacing blooms, which eventually died, turning black. The Los Angeles artist titled the piece *Every Artist Gave a Breath (Graz '88)*, a name at once poetic and slyly poignant, like so much of her work.

This was a heady career moment for Larner, then just three years out of the California Institute of Arts, where she had focused on photography. She had started making cultures the previous year, with *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny* (1987), whose title names the ingredients she had placed in a dish. Their cellular material and attendant microorganisms worked their way into the agar, creating a still life that grew and decomposed over time. In other cases, she ventured into portraiture, having L.A. dealer Margo Leavin and the pseudonymous artist John Dogg breathe onto agar cultures, and naming her subjects in the works' titles. *Every Artist Gave a Breath* is, then, a group portrait. One might think of it as a science-infused update of the canvas that Francis Picabia had friends sign when they came to visit him while he was sick at home (*L'Œil cacodylate*, 1921), or Nina Leen's 1950 photograph of the New York School "Irascibles": it is a representation of a living network that, in Larner's case, was itself once alive.



**Liz Larner:** *V (planchette)*, 2013, mulberry paper, aluminum, and pigmented egg tempera, 98 by 88 by 68 inches.  
COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS



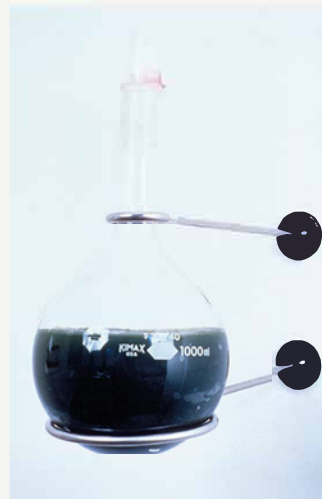
Larner soon shifted to using dramatically different materials in her sculptures; but this early foray into **bio art** provides one possible blueprint for understanding the protean and seductive work that she has made over the ensuing thirty-five years, as she has ventured into eye-tricking steel abstractions, scrappy ceramics, and delicate assemblages of plastic refuse. The work demonstrates her zest for chance and her interests in instability (whether at the level of microorganisms or human beings) and shifting perceptions, as well as her irreverent approach to a century of modernist sculpture, which she has taken as hers to tweak, upend, and one-up on both aesthetic and sociopolitical grounds.

**A BIT OF HISTORICAL CONTEXT** helps chart Larner's accomplishments. In the late 1970s, Gordon Matta-Clark cooked up agar cultures in his SoHo loft, with an emphasis on the alchemical aspects of

the process. Around the same time, Alan Sonfist was studying precisely how various microbes behave in agar. Larner took a fairly straightforward approach, creating the culture and letting the material go to work. (She explained in a video interview from her Los Angeles studio that she was unaware of the precedents of Matta-Clark and Sonfist until after the fact.) She used food coloring to dye layers of culture red, yellow, and blue in some cases, nodding to the fundamentals of color theory, and perhaps the endgame monochromes of Alexander Rodchenko and Barnett Newman. The bacteria become a kind of brush, she told me, carving through the culture in a send-up of painterly machismo that concludes with the growth's death. Many of her petri dishes are displayed in this sepulchral state, though *Orchid* involves pairing a fresh culture with the spent one from the last time it was shown. The work replicates itself every time it is shown, coming alive again, dying again, the same but different.

That cycle of rebirth can sound exotic, but such self-generation is at the very core of Conceptualism, implicit in Sol LeWitt's notion that "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art." Brought to life just after Conceptual art's heyday, Larner's cultures invite a reading that deemphasizes the movement's most well-worn associations, like dematerialization and ephemerality, while highlighting its parallels with organic processes and chemical and biological reactions (with all the ecological issues that attend them). Dieter Roth is a precursor, having served up biodegradable artworks made of chocolate, cheese, sour milk, and plenty more in the 1960s. (Sour cream, salmon eggs, and heroin are among the other substances that Larner cultured.)

Just as Larner was inviting artists to breathe, she was scaling up her aleatoric interests from the microscopic to the architectural. The sculptures she made during the ensuing decades were not literally alive, but they found other ways to repudiate a Minimalism that she found cold and dead. *Corner Basher* (1988)—a deliciously self-explanatory title—is a kind of mechanical version of the tetherball game, with a compact metal wrecking ball in place of a volleyball, and an engine that makes it fly. Set in a corner and secured with metal chains, it does devastating work on nearby walls over a show's run. The key is that its viewers can control its power setting. They are implicated in the destruction, asked to decide how much damage the work will do (at least until another person comes along). They also have the option of shutting it down.



Liz Larner: *Every Artist Gave a Breath* (Graz '89), 1989, glass, nutrient agar, and steel, 11 by 5 by 5 inches. COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS



Liz Larner: *Corner Basher*, 1988, steel, electric motor, and speed control, 10 feet high. COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS

*Corner Basher* sits in the lineage of kinetic art and institutional critique, but it came about after Larner attended a display of the outrageously macho robots that Mark Pauline presents under the name *Survival Research Laboratories*. "Look at all these guys with their remote controls, controlling these machines," she recalled in our conversation. "It's so lame. What we need is a machine people can control themselves." It is a nuanced update of, and an injection of ethics into, Chris Burden's *Samson* (1985), a jack that extends two timbers with increasing pressure against facing walls every time a visitor passes through a turnstile to enter the room. Instead of automatic force, Larner offers free agency. *Corner Basher* is a violent work, but one with a constructive side, as a generator of gestural wall sculptures that change swing by swing. No two successive viewers see quite the

same piece.



Liz Larner: *Corner Basher*, 1988, steel, electric motor, and speed control, 10 feet high. COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS

After creating things that move and that die, Larner began embedding visual indeterminacy into static objects. *I Thought I Saw a Pussycat* (1997–98) is a tangle of blue and yellow translucent plastic links so intricately bound up that the eye cannot easily resolve it. The two crumbled, cube-like forms of *2 as 3 and Some, Too* (1997–98)—made of steel rods wrapped in paper—shift in appearance as you circle them because of the unusual curves of their bars, and their paint jobs.

*Untitled (Wall)*, 2000–01, is a roughly five-foot-tall, seven-foot-wide wall made of densely crowded painted steel cubes; even viewed up close, the shapes break down into a forest of lines. "You can't really rely on your perceptions if visual information is complicated," Larner said in an interview in the catalogue for her 1998 show at MAK Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna. "I don't want the recognition of the form—the external shape of the object—to be the primary element of my sculpture."



**WHAT, THEN, IS THE PRIMARY ELEMENT** of Lerner’s sculpture? It is the actual experience of attempting to apprehend them, the process of negotiating them. That is true of plenty of postwar sculpture, of course, from the immaculate boxes of Larry Bell to the meticulously controlled optical environments of Robert Irwin. What differentiates Lerner’s project, and what makes her work so potent, is her astonishingly diverse array of means, from the traditional and plainspoken to the beguiling and unusual. After the petri dishes, she gamely turned to steel, plastic, fiberglass, and wood at various points, creating discrete objects that manage to embody the uncertainty—and the thrill—of being in a world where so much feels fluid and ephemeral.

Lerner’s majestic *2001* (2001) is a bulbous yet angular fiberglass form, twelve feet in diameter and coated in iridescent green and purple automotive paint. Cast from molds that were rendered and carved with the aid of a computer, it combines six stages from an animation of a cube morphing into a sphere. It refuses to resolve into a single image for the viewer. (It also happens to outmatch pretty much all the products of the Finish Fetish school in its sleek appeal.) The swirling “Planchette” works—variously wall-hung and freestanding—suggest curtains undulating in the wind or even thick billows of smoke. Made with paper that is mounted on an aluminum frame and painted with a dark egg tempera, each looks like a three-dimensional shape that is in the process of changing into another.

On some occasions, Lerner has offered exhilarating works that are adaptable, on their own terms, to various locations and welcome all comers. *Bird in Space* (1989) is made of nylon cords and silk threads whose length can be adjusted to a room’s borders. Stealing the title of Brancusi’s soaring phallic work, the piece outlines a sizable horizontal curve in a single line, with its two points held to the floor by steel blocks and its body defined by numerous taut strings radiating to the ceiling and two opposing walls (picture a very thin whale skeleton). *Bird* is gargantuan and ultra-minimal, powerful and confined, attributes that grow more incisive when one reads the first word of its title in relation to gender, as Lerner proposed in a 2019 talk for the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which owns the work. *Come Together* (1989), meanwhile, is an adaptable starburst of lines—ribbon, rope, hair, and more—that emanate from a single point to the surrounding walls, floor, and ceiling. The work is somewhat different each time it is installed, and brushes aside the idea of a universal, uniform state (or viewer). *And I Thought I Saw...*, Lerner pointed out in the MAK catalogue, “can be arranged in many different ways... It takes up a certain amount of space although the form will not always be the same.”

Since transience and mutability are inherent in Lerner’s art, it has been intriguing to see ceramics—the product of multiple transformations, before and after firing—become perhaps her most frequently employed medium over the past two decades. Here, too, she emphasizes the unsettled and off-kilter, welcoming ruptures and cracks in the flat, ovular “caesura” works she hangs on the wall. Painted in blazing colors after emerging from the kiln, they look like they could shapeshift or grow into some more solid form at any moment.

Lerner has also been making craggy, rough-hewn Lucio Fontana-esque ceramic blobs, representing asteroids. At a show at Regen Projects in Los Angeles last year, she paired them with expansive floor pieces consisting of her family’s used plastic containers, cleaned, painted, and stitched together into sprawling, amorphous cascades of translucent blue and green that resemble seafoam. (A larger version of the seafoam piece will appear in Lerner’s 2022 Kunsthalle Zürich survey.) In this uncanny pairing, an extraterrestrial phenomenon meets out-of-control, human-generated chaos. Combining solid ceramics and flimsy plastic, the ancient and the modern, the artist seems to conjure a world in which humans have disappeared. Rocks fly through the heavens, and garbage—albeit garbage that has been transmuted into art—fills the earth.

Lerner has committed herself to a restlessness that is rare and admirable and not without sacrifice. While other artists spend decades mining a given style or medium, she has been willing to abandon even the most fertile terrain in search of something new, again and again. This manner of operating, as motley as some of her sculptures themselves, has influenced a diverse range of artists, from Darren Bader to Anicka Yi to Matt Paweski.



Liz Lerner: *2001*, 2001, fiberglass, stainless steel, and automotive paint, 12 by 12 by 12 feet.  
COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS



Liz Lerner: *Distomunge*, 2017, ceramic, glaze, stones, and minerals, 22 3/4 by 28 1/2 by 8 1/2 inches.  
COURTESY REGEN PROJECTS

If there is a single work that best embodies Larner's playfulness, invention, and pathos, it is, fittingly, a transitional one. *Used to Do the Job* (1987) is a brushed sheet-metal cube that supports another of the same size—rough-hewn, in alien amber hues. Once again, your eyes can tell you only so much. The work's caption states that it includes coal, copper, iron, zinc, sulfur, tar, TNT, etc., materials that can be used to cast a bronze sculpture—or to make a bomb. Larner has pushed the very different languages of process art and Minimalism into the realm of looming terror. Could this artwork actually explode? Its title is perfectly double-edged. These are the materials used to do the job. This is the art that used to do the job. It is a sculpture harboring furtive energies that are ready to be wielded.

#### ON THE CALENDAR

"Liz Larner: Don't put it back like it was," SculptureCenter, New York, Jan. 20–Mar. 28, 2022; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Apr. 30–Sept. 4, 2022. "Liz Larner: below above," [Kunsthalle Zurich](#), June 11–Aug. 21, 2022.