

REGEN PROJECTS *

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Form and Vice Versa: The Sculptures of Liz Larner

The mainstream in art has been dealing for quite some time with extension and transgression: new geographies are emerging, people assign domains to each other and small or big battles are fought in those domains. It seems that the artistic world falls more and more into two parts: on one side the old and new "geniuses" – those who don't want to understand what is going on and stubbornly believe in the artistic essence – and the "smart" strategists – for who the discourse is still gaining importance although – due to the very logic of this development – it vanishes more and more. There is less and less space for dealing with form and medium between alleged ingenuity and shrewdness. Either everything remains completely unquestioned due to a false historical understanding of art and its role – think of the attitude of painters to be immune to criticism due to their medium that has a renaissance right now. Or dealing with form or the decision for a medium is a question of strategy that is answered with a proviso so everything can be annulled at any moment. It is somehow an embarrassment and outmoded for this position to come to a decision at all. If there has to be a decision, it is taken in favor of media which are not historically occupied and in a sense more neutral. It is therefore not taken for painting or sculpture. And if a decision is still taken for those media, it is taken with an ironical distance that signals noncommittalism and allows for a change of position.

With regard to those issues, the artist Liz Larner occupies a radically different position. Her decision for sculpture was taken with vehemence and has nothing to do with either monomaniac passion or strategic attitude. Thereby, she is standing outside the usual scenario and outside a scene that functions very often too smoothly. But standing outside this position does not mean an intended marginalization in her case. It reflects her critical position with respect to her role as an artist vis à vis the artistic form and with respect to the artistic form as an autonomous field of discussion. This (outside) position is taken in a way that does not allow for an ironic distance or fast movements on the surface. Instead it is a position of serious poetry, a poetry that is totally compatible with critical analysis. She also does not try to deal didactically with form, the form does not fall out of the analysis, the analysis is generated by the sculpture and thereby closely bound to it. The central issue of her artistic practice seems to me to create indissolubilities by organizing apparent oppositions in mental and physical space.

An early and well-known sculpture by Liz Larner *Corner Basher* (1988) is a machine that seems to demolish the show room from the inside. Its effect can be controlled by the viewers. A first but wrong analysis could focus exclusively on the demolition or the "opening" of the exhibition room. This would be in a way the purely conceptual reading of the sculpture and it might actually suffice for the interpretation of comparable works by Larner's male colleagues. But in this case demolition also means contact and relation: the sculpture is not just positioned in a room due to its life as a machine it can attach itself to the room. This attachment also happens toward the viewer who can influence the intensity (as velocity). In addition, Larner's conscious way of dealing with her role as a woman is of importance here: On one hand, there is her insistence to work in the domain of sculpture that is so full of male chauvinist boasting. On the other hand, she does not develop an autonomous alternate program from a female's point of departure but she starts from such stereotypes like metal-as-machine in order to structure space. There is no distance with a twinkle in the eye that would be possible from a conceptual position. But there are also no minimalistic restraint and pureness which could make the concept and its embodiment fall into oblivion. Larner rejects both the unquestioned effects of grandeur of a metal sculpture and a surface interpretation of the sculpture as a simple signifier.

A sculpture like *Verwoben* (1989) is made out of woven stripes of the most different materials that are situated in the space like a spider web that escaped regularity. The starting point is here the investigation of material and space: To what extent can a certain material be forced to assume a certain form in space? What happens to the space if different materials are mixed? The tight stripes held together by firm knots reproduce the tension that is created at a different level by the mix. But the sculpture as a whole is anchored in the space and relaxes the tension. The spectator has to construct the relations between the single parts and the whole again and again. In this piece, Larner makes the relation of mental and physical organization of space very clear and explicit: The construction of formal levels and the relation between them (which is established and vanishes subsequently) has as a consequence a mental construction. This mental construction does not have to be translated into meaning, the sculpture as an interconnection of forms can be simply transferred from the outside to

the inside. There is no meaning construction of a formal content but a formal construction that can occupy different spaces at the same time.

In the catalogue for the exhibition "Not Quiet" (Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris, 1992) is an interview collage with the participating artists. As to all other questions, Liz Larner's response to a question concerning the role of art vis a vis "broader social concerns" is a Rorschach-like drawn figure. It would be a big mistake to view this as a refusal to establish analytic relations. The translation into language-like symbols as connections of form and content – is not even used by her in the context of art explanation in a catalogue since the connection of form and form is already established in the artwork. And this connection is for sure not non-analytic since it is too complex.

Huge white plates are hanging from the ceiling in another work *ddeefiinntu* (1992). Those plates cut the space – not in a fixed way but always in motion. Here, the spectator is threatened: the sculpture moves down from above and seems to want to crash anybody else in the room. Like with the above mentioned machine sculpture, it would be too simplistic to reduce the whole work to issues of space. Gigantic letters are painted on the white plates, letters that never stand still and that never become recognizable in relation to each other. They are reduced to pure form and they overlap with the other forms of the sculpture. Sometimes, they are almost revealed in their context but they are never able to arrive at their content. In principle, it would be possible to reconstruct a content – the sequence of letters would denote the word unidentified. Even then, the content would be totally subsumed by the form since the word executes its content already at the formal level. The spectator starts to understand that the artist has fixated a form that persists unchanged in the subconscious, where it will get imprinted more and more. The form is fixated both in the mental and in the physical space but at the same time it is always in motion. This motion happens between immense heaviness and light flowing and between the space of the spectator and the space of the sculpture.

Something emerges from Liz Larner's work like a very basic insight: All the oppositions and all the different levels cannot be treated by themselves and separated. They only become visible if the artist fits them into the system that she relies on in her artistic practice completely – form and space. Relying on just one system might have a kind of nook thinking as a consequence in other cases which means

that many artistic issues and aspects are omitted. With respect to Larner's work we have to understand this decision in a different way: She wants to do without a big inventory of language-like symbols since the system she is creating can cover everything at the formal level. Some people in contemporary sculpture are trying to simply negate or discredit the semantic level. The artistic practice happens only on the object level which means a negation of the meta level – a negation of meaning or content. Such art is often analyzed as “non-representational” since representation is always understood as a relation of the object level and the meta level. Larner's practice is different: she does not negate the meta level but reduces it to the object level. Since her syntax at the object level is so complex and brilliant so it can be transferred directly and without translation into the mental space. What she really negates is the strategic decision. If there would be a strategic decision this would mean that there would have been another possibility in the beginning. Precisely this is not allowed due to her decision for sculpture since it is at the same time a decision for the reduction of the meta level and after it is made it is not possible anymore to divide the artistic discourse into several possibilities. Meaning is represented via formal references and only very indirectly. Take references like the machistic machine concept or the conceptual usage of writing: Those are already dissolved in Larner's work and shifted into the domain of triviality. There is no other side of form in her work – the form is too complex in itself.

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Catherine Liu

Cornering the Set-Up

There is a level of sculptural abstraction that is produced by an artist's intervention – an intervention that disrupts the very space of viewership itself. A sculptor once said that good sculpture should deny photography: – that is it should be unphotographable – because it defies stasis and eludes capture, because its very presence in the space of representation makes the seizing of such space impossi-

ble for any technique of camera obscura. Larner's work engages in a project of disrupting the construction of the space of the art work and in the process challenges the viewer to enter the space of the exhibition in a different manner.

Liz Larner has used the strategies of installation in order to create powerful allegories of the way in which the experience of visual representation is constructed. The questions that her work raises are directly related to the way in which the gaze is detachable from the body. In *Chain Perspective: Reversed, Reflected, Extended* (1992)¹ she uses chains to "draw" the lines of sight in classical perspective that create an illusion of depth in two-dimensional media. By playing with such techniques of classical representation, she, in her own words, "gives another perspective on perspective". The properties of the material with which she works are also always highly charged and polyvalent. Chains call to mind a myriad of associations around servitude, restraint and constraint, laying down the law, drawing limits and lines of exclusion. Larner's work has always alluded to and used force and tension in ways that evoke philosophical reflexion. If her work resists and seduces the viewer at the same time, it is because it uses the force of resistance inherent in the materials themselves to evoke their aesthetic and theoretical potential. Larner's installations often work with the mutual resistance of objects that exert upon the space and that space exerts upon objects. A mutual incomprehension and a reciprocal indifference are overcome through the creation of productive tensions, tensions that produced by pliable materials drawn taut, and tensions that can produce almost invisible reactions over time. These tensions and resistances can be interpreted in the context of Freud's take on ambivalence and Nietzsche's take on force and resentment, but we cannot do any more in this context than allude to them as some of the difficult and intellectually exciting associations that Larner's work calls up. Larner's work is close to theory and to philosophy, but it keeps its distance in regard to an explicit engagement with discourse.² An excess of proximity often generates a force-field that keeps at bay that which is closest.

The notion of "place" in the work of Liz Larner is explored in a rigorous and inevitably theoretical manner through techniques of installation. Installation is a set-up that disturbs all notions of setting up. In Samuel Weber's essay, "Upsetting the Setup: Remarks on Heidegger's Questioning After Technics",³

1 This piece was part of "Helter Skelter", a show at MOCA in Los Angeles. It was also installed in 303 Gallery, New York City, in 1990.

2 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 263.

3 Samuel Weber, "Upsetting the Setup: Remarks on Heidegger's Questioning After Technics", *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 55–75. All references to this text will appear parenthetically within the text.

Weber suggests that we understand the Heideggerian use of "Gestell" in terms of "emplacement" by working through a certain notion of "installation". Technology for Weber is about the frame, about the situation of a horizon, and the setting of place: The notions of emplacement, then, collect and assemble the various ways in which everything, human beings included, is 'cornered' (gestellt) and set in place. But since the places thus setup are the result of emplacement, they can never simply be taken for granted. Places must continually be established, orders continually placed. As emplacement, the goings-on of modern technics thus display a markedly ambivalent character: they arrest, bring to a halt, by setting in place; but this placement itself gives way to other settings, to the incessant replacing of orders through which new places are set up and upset (Weber page 72).

The question of the corner is interesting here, because Larner has consistently been working around the notion of how to cut a corner in a room, in the exhibition space of what has been idealized as the white cube. She often installs her work in the corners, framing these spaces with chains, machines, a game of mirrors, and even words painted on both walls and floors. The corner acts both as support and obstacle; she makes us acutely aware of their sharpness, of their marginality to the room and their structural relationship to all notions and aesthetics of centeredness. For Weber, the set-up that needs to be questioned is one that has been evoked by what he translates as the Heideggerian notion of technics. Technic installs the human being on a horizon: this "installation" allows for the human being to have a certain, coherent relationship with nature, available to him or her either as a resource to be exploited, or a ruin to be mourned.

Larner's installation plays with the notion of an idealized, static space of representation by evoking the effects and marks of time. Time begins to play an important factor when force is exerted on the very supports of the white cube itself: in the case of *Wall Scratcher* (1988) and *Chain Between Wall* (1990), a projected destruction of the infrastructure of the exhibition space is contained in the sculptures themselves. Attention is called to the very conditions of installation itself: an art object is supported literally and metaphorically by a complex of infrastructural institutions. The marking of time within the art object takes place in the tension of projected, inevitable destruction. The chain installations can pull down the corners of the white cube, given enough time: the *Corner Basher*

(1988)⁴ can work on its dogged little path of destruction, and if given enough time, it too will destroy the support of the space of representation. The machine marks the intervention of time upon space. This points to the way in which supports, both figurative and metaphorical, are supposed to be effaced, made invisible even, by traditional techniques of art installation. In the age of corporate sponsorship, a certain amount of institutional prudishness has been shed when museums must use corporate logos in their advertisements for a show, but the normal sequence of affairs still demands that a certain kind of "support" be as unobtrusive as possible in the display of art objects. There are artists who take on these paradoxes directly in a mode of critique: these strategies are ideological and Larner's are allegorical. In ideological critique, the en-framing of visual representation is almost never questioned – this is why activism in the art world almost always functions in the modalities of inclusion and identification, whereas allegorical critique questions the very conditions of representation itself. Viewership, "communication" of a political message is predicated upon the transparent space in which the art object has been placed and transparency is precisely what Larner asks us to question.

In Larner's project, *Machine* (1998–2001), the use of the latest automobile motion sensor technology⁵ allows her to continue to work through questions of presence, topographies that shape representation and principles of destruction. This machine/installation, still as yet in blueprint form, is one of the strongest interventions in the field of the inevitable encounter between technology and Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle". Contemporary artists and contemporary theorists can be too close for comfort – in ways that are not immediately recognizable. This kind of uncanny intimacy however can take the form of mutual resistances that make for the most productive of tensions. Art must always in some sense, resist theory, and theory art. Liz Larner is an artist who has never stopped reflecting on the place, the frame, the emplacement of the art object and the methods, techniques and supports for its display. It is impossible, therefore, when writing on her work, to avoid the question of what it means to write "on" an artist's work in general. What kind of surface offers itself up and to what kind of inscription? Larner's work challenges the writer to think of these issues because she is always working on the status of the art object in relation to its structural and infra-structural support system. We say without thinking that some one has "written" on Larner, but what does such a thing mean? If writing "on" art is not to be merely a prosthetic practice, it has to take on the challenge offered by Larner's work to think through the forms and constraints that shape and support writing itself.

4 *Corner Basher* is operated by on/off and speed control switches in a control box mounted to the wall about 20 feet away from the cornerbasher itself. The destruction of the architecture is always variable and depends on construction material of the walls, the amount of time the machine is in operation, and the rate at which it has been run.

5 *Machine* is a work in progress.

Rosetta Brooks

"Take an object

Do something to it

Do something else to it"

Jasper Johns

From the outset of her career, Liz Larner's art has eluded easy categorization, refusing to fit into the oversimplified classifications of successive art movements in the 1980s. Initially a photographer, Larner abandoned the medium of photography, preferring the sculptural experience and the domain of sculptural installation to investigate pre-existing representations of space, to examine ideas about language and meaning and to explore conceptual thinking in its relationship to visual data.

But if critics and contemporary art observers have had difficulty in labeling her art in accordance with current trends (post-minimal, post conceptual, 'neo' this or that), Larner's work nonetheless has clear ties to a number of prominent contemporary artists whose work stands uniquely apart from the vagaries and rigid boundaries imposed on them by the linearity of art historical discourse. Perhaps no one artist comes to mind so easily as Bruce Nauman, whose sculptural installations and eclectic range of activities have made him a singular figure within his generation.

Iconoclasts and eclectics both, Nauman and Larner attempt, in their own ways to make concepts real, often through sculptural means. For both artists, the work's physicality is intimately wrapped up in the mental gymnastics of looking and, in the process, of changing perceptions. Both artists combine conceptual and physical spaces as a site for their work. But probably the two areas where the artists have the strongest bond, and which have become the cornerstones of their artistic activity, are in their fascination with language and their attitude of innocent naiveté which results in smart and profound art.

Both Nauman and Larner are intrigued with the relationship between language and objects, with the point where language starts to break down as a useful tool for communication. Both, in their own ways explore the differences between what something is called or named and what it actually *is*. Larner puts it succinctly when she says: "The meaning you get from your association with words and the meaning you get from the object when you're near it are sometimes two different things." This is the edge where art occurs for each of them. In an early work entitled *From Hand to Mouth* by Nauman, for example, a wax cast of lips, neck and arm is isolated, detailing with an almost dogmatic literalism the passage from body part to body part named. The piece literally illustrates the popular catch phrase "living hand to mouth". But more significantly it concretely links utterance to gesture, word to object and concept to reality in a profound and dramatic manner. Like many of Nauman's art works, it creates new sense from apparent nonsense.

For Larner, on the other hand, it is the mismatch, the misrecognition created by words and objects in combination that intrigues her. Like Nauman she presents the viewer with a kind of literalism, a matter-of-fact dramatic simplicity both of language and materials to create a complex, multi-layered work

where multiple meanings and potential readings are opened up for investigation. In an early work like *Whipping Cream, Heroin and Salmon Eggs*, for example, the title links language that stimulates thoughts of raunchy sexuality, decadence and raw opulence to the experience of the petri dish combo of materials which, over time transforms itself into a nasty-looking mold, creating a sculpture in which we experience both the words and the materials in a new light. Larner's combinations of various organic forms and substances with their associative meanings create novel syntaxes – both sculpturally and linguistically – ultimately producing visual sentences out of materials positioned together like words. Art like this is based on disciplined wondering rather than proscriptive doubting. Both artists, in distinctly different yet complementary ways, question language and objects in order to return them to use, then re-use them in unexpected ways and contexts in order to fathom their potential significance. In Nauman's case, a familiar idiom is reconfigured by simple displacement and thus becomes unfamiliar, thereby obliging us to confront the world as if our habitual means of contact with it needs to be relearned. Larner on the other hand, by the simple juxtaposition of names and objects, emphasizes the paradoxical, the gap between the worlds of the experiential and the descriptive, the theoretical and the practical. Ultimately though, both artists are investigating the issue most central to their work: How does experience resonate with language?

Though rarely discussed in relation to Larner's art, there is nonetheless a humorous, tongue-in-cheek aspect to her work. Titles like *Cough & Bottom of my Shoe, Whipping Cream, Heroin and Salmon eggs* or *Used To Do the Job* all suggest a witty, deadpan humor not unlike the kind present in Nauman's oeuvre. There is too an almost pragmatic literalness, a kind of 'playing dumb' in order to move beyond the pragmatics of conventional wisdom. It is an attitude which artist William Wiley has described as "seeing with the dumb eye": the ability to look at things innocently and unlearnedly so that one can see them for what they are instead of what they're called.

In the end though, the matter-of-fact, plain-speaking, objective-laden aesthetic that lies at the heart of Larner's oeuvre is the very thing that creates the poetic moments in her art, and that energizes the spaces – both physical and mental – that she seeks to explore.

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

Visible Space, Elusive Object

Liz Larner's work combines a kind of directness with what might under certain circumstances be considered its opposite, the elusive. A combination Larner achieves, one suspects, by default. Which is to say that one suspects that she actually has little interest in elusiveness but can't avoid producing it in the course of pursuing a certain logic of directness. To that extent her work plays a game of eluding itself, most obviously when Larner makes it out of a deferral or other exchange between it and what frames it, *i.e.*, what connects it to the gallery's wall, what it stand or rests on or is otherwise supported, and in that presented, by. To use Heidegger's terms, I should say that this self-eluding follows from Larner's combining appearance and phenomenon, and is an effect of her keeping these two active without reducing them to a familiar (traditional or officially non-traditional) opposition between the figurative and the abstract.

I have always located the work's elusiveness in the difficulty I have in describing it. It's quite American, although that has now become such a general condition (ubiquitous object of both aspiration and resistance) that, at least where art is concerned, the adjective is nowadays as it were descriptively disadvantaged. Nonetheless Larner's work is direct in a blunt sort of way which Americans either invented or pretended to invent, which others see in America, and which American art may be said to have aroused in others who, having seen it there, discovered it in themselves, making possible a Jackson Pollock in every Alpine suburb, an Eva Hesse in every Scottish country. But, if it is that, Larner's work is at the same time an example of what one gets when an artist can take the ability to be direct for granted, because it's the tradition she occupies, while being dissatisfied with the form the tradition has come to inhabit.

It is possible to describe her work's relationship to that tradition – I am going to here – but doing so seems to leave something out. What is excluded is a question less about art history than about some not exclusively aesthetic question about decision and the context within which decisiveness occurs, and which is where Larner's work becomes elusive in the sense that one can't seem to find quite the right word to describe the general qualitative atmosphere of what she does. I have been thinking about it since the *bomb* and *culture* pieces, both images of the irreversable (explosion and implosion, one might say), the one emphatic and the other ephemeral. For instance, Larner's

work seems to exhibit a certain belief in immediacy that at first sight relates it to that of older artists like Mary Heilman, but one soon realizes that the comparison is misleading. Heilman's work is heavily invested in the blunt and the rough and gains strength from what one might read as an impatience with the idea that one should be patient with materials, but that's not what happens in Larner's. Neither expressionist nor doctrinally opposed to delicacy, Larner's work may then not be about bluntness as roughness at all. This possibility brings one closer to what this work does, or is, and I'll return to it.

First, however, to the question of its relationship to sculpture as that has been throughout her lifetime, with some fleeting reference to what it was even earlier. Unlike the work of most of her contemporaries, Larner's sculpture is not sculpture about everything else, but sculpture which is about sculpture. Or means to be, since there are (onto)logical problems with the idea that something could actually be about itself (where is it when it's outside of itself, where are the whereabouts of itself when it's about itself?) Between thirty and forty years ago a tendency began which caused a great many American artists, led into a religious frenzy against "illusionism" stimulated chiefly by the famous evangelist Donald Judd, to turn to sculpture as an alternative to the seduction of the space that wasn't really there which painting was said not only to provide but to be helplessly subject to. Painting was not real. Sculpture was real because it was a thing made out of stuff, and thus it was that the terminology of sculpture could become the language of the real and as such a symbolic field in which all that was not a thing could find for itself a place within the real despite its origin, as idea, image, or sign, in the domain of non-substance, the insubstantiality of thought and action. Thus, in Smithson, sculpture could accommodate landscape as picture (but not pictured) and trace, artifact and accident, geology, archaeology, and history, as a zone in which to contemplate the deinstitutionalization of the art work and the simultaneous institutionalization of a bit of landscape as a work of art. These are the terms in which I have described Hamish Fulton's photographic practice as a conversion of an originally sculptural (Minimalism into Conceptualism) approach into one which does not actually rearrange things (the ecology question) while inserting them into the language of the real, and that would be the sense in which Larner works in a context where sculpture has provided a language for everything else

while she herself is concerned to find one either for sculpture, or more importantly, through it.¹ I note, not quite *en passant*, that Larner's chief area of study while an art student was (however nominally) photography.

It is common nowadays, since Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, to come across ghosts. Just as Derrida has shown that the concept of an end to Marxism – particularly of the idea, popular with the commercial classes, that the collapse of late-Stalinism in the face of capitalism means the failure of Marxist ideas about history and even of the historical – in fact guarantees that dependence on it which is inscribed in such nomenclature as post-Marxist and post-historical, so might one say that Kant's art object and the criteria he developed for its discussion live on as the critical stimulus for art after art, ghost's which the latter must always invoke if it is to be 'after' them, leading to a constant dance of symbolic reinstitution as the necessary prelude to an equally symbolic displacement of it to which it must therefore and thenceforth interminably, or eternally, refer.

Judd's career amounted to a sustained railing against the ghost of the pictorial, Kant in the form of the (for most of the time) still-living spectre Clement Greenberg. Above all, for Judd sculpture must eschew the movement generated by painting's seductive oscillation between surface and depicted space. Which is, by the way, movement which takes place inside one's head. Judd's Minimalism was in this respect sculpture as thought control, and what it sought to keep under control was any desire to depart from the regime of the real.

I should suggest that Larner could be said to both extend, and be indifferent to, that regime. She belongs to a generation for which, since they were in place when she arrived, an earlier notion of the real is itself ghostly, spectral, unreal. It can't be hers because it's theirs, and having already taken place can only be part of the background. A ground for action which points backwards in that it monumentalizes an experience which, thus monumentalized, is present as precedent.

This is the sense in which one might phrase the question of what Larner is making sculpture be as one in which precedent is sometimes followed and sometimes ignored. *A propos* the real, and the question of what she's making things, or thingness as an aspect of the sculptural, and actions – similarly considered as actions within (or about) sculpture – be, it is worth noting that Larner has made things

¹ See my "*Bildhauerei als Symbol für alles andere*", in *Bildhauerzeichnungen*, ed Peter Pakesch (Graz: Künstlerhaus Graz, 1987), subsequently published in English as Chapter 31, "Sculpture as Everything Else: Twenty Years or So of the Question of Landscape", in Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beyond Piety, Critical Essays on the Visual Arts, 1986–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

which act – banging holes in the wall *Corner Basher* (1988), scratching it *Wall Scratcher* (1988) – and typically uses the exhibition space less as a generalized arena in which a work might be placed than as a specific situation with which the sculpture interacts, as both thing and sign – and that where it becomes a sign for interaction it is (couldn't be) to that extent no longer about sculpture, but a sculptural event involving an idea of interaction. The question is what kind of an idea that is, once one has accepted that it originates as a sculptural one.

A corollary of which would be that if one says that in certain respects an artist's work looks like others', that's not necessarily to say that it's indebted to it. It could perhaps just as well be the product of an internal logic which coincidentally leads to a conclusion like that of something with which, in ambition or origin, it has nothing whatsoever in common. So similarities could be intentional or unintentional, the result of an conscious engagement or unconscious influence, or of coincidence. In Larner one finds some of each. Often, as with *2 as 3 and some* (1997), one might first see a work of hers as an inversion of the emphases of a possible Minimalist precedent. But if *2 as 3 and some* reminds one of Sol Lewitt then it is as a spindly and also jumbled-up version of Lewitt. A Lewitt reimagined from the beginning and so thoroughly that an intentional (or unavoidable) reference also becomes that which indicates that little is to be gained from pursuing the comparison. One will have to start somewhere else. A possibly intentional reference has perhaps unintentionally led to some entirely other possibilities for what might be described as a set of open cubes. The work is not an anti-Lewitt, nor a kind of footnote to or elaboration on one of his themes, but is rather something much more like an object where history requires that one be reminded of him in order that one may see how little the piece has to do with his work. To see the work as an anti-Lewitt, or as bringing together Hesse's grid with Lewitt's open cubes, would be to preclude seeing what it does because such a reading would miss what Larner is making sculpture be.

She's making it be something in which an idea of surface need not be continuous with the idea bound up in the form which presents it – contra Judd, colour in Larner is not an encoding of the idea posited by the form which bears it but rather goes somewhere else – and where line is similarly independent of either surface or form. Greenberg, one recalls, said that what was revolutionary in Pollock

was his use of line to construct a space which was not in that made out of solids and voids, line freed of responsibility to things. That would be line realized as de-realization, an idea close to but not the same as Larner's saying that she uses "line to make forms that could not be perceived at all if I were to use solid volume..."² It's not the same because she makes sculpture, so the idea of volume must be there as it need not be in painting. Larner says that "sculpture is space seen", to which I'll return imminently, and perhaps one could make the provisional distinction that where sculpture makes space visible painting seeks to make visible vision's dependence on space.³

In which case one might say that *2 as 3 and some* uses colour and line as agents of dematerialization, where that is a necessary condition of mobility, in particular of movement between one visual possibility and another. The sort of movement I've associated here with pictorialism, and which follows from colour having nothing necessarily to do with what supports it, and line as trajectory and passage having nothing to do with static mass. Larner says that not all objects, are sculptures and not all sculptures are objects, and it is the latter part of this assertion which concerns me here. Her use of colour in *2 as 3 and some*, and elsewhere, as in for example *Devex Yellow* (1997), sets the kind of speciality which colour produces, encountered in the one as a complication of a set of linear trajectories or tensions – three cubes – in the other as a pile of open shapes which become an intense mass – of flickering (painted with two yellows) loops, forms named after movements – not exactly against the structure considered as a physical thing so much as in a relationship of parallelism, or of continuity as intensification which transforms as it intensifies.

The surface of *2 and 3 and some* is a kind of *papier-mâché*, which looks quite fragile but is in fact strong. Colour is applied in a manner consistent with the way the cubes are constructed, enhancing the analogy to painting by making the ground and surface out of the same gesture. The greyed out or atmospheric colours, light blue, brown, grey itself, do not repeat the structure of the cubes but rather begin an end, turn into one another, as it were at will. To that extent the life of the surface seems independent of that of the support, an impression reinforced by mathematical asymmetry of the structure and the colours which adorn it. There are three colours and three cubes, but while three cubes have between them a total of thirty-six lines, *2 and 3 as some* contains only twenty-five bits of

2 Larner, note to the author, march 16th 1997.

3 Ibid

separate colour (blue¹ occurring seven times, brown eight, and grey ten). However, as the colour changes from brown to blue to grey it restates the form in another sense, slowing it down here, speeding it up there, blurring a change of direction in one place while interrupting a straightforward movement along (which would also be a straightforward reading of) a cube's edge in another. That is also what the irregularity, or wobbliness, of the lines out of which the cubes are made does, so one may say that the colour has a non-deductive relationship to the form in that the colours do not repeat the form's structure, but a parallel relationship to the form in that their non-systematic occurrence is, in that it's not systematic, could be read as another version of that mutation of the originally geometric structure into a more organic form which is the piece. Tony Smith said that he made his famous six foot cube because he wanted something one could neither look over nor which would be overwhelming huge, but he also said that he chose the dimension because it was human size. *2 and 3 as some* is also six feet high, actually probably about Larner's height, and the lines or struts vary in diameter from just under four inches to about six, the dimensions, perhaps, of limbs. All of which returns one to Larner's treatment of its surface.

Willem de Kooning died while I was writing this, and everybody quoted his remark about flesh being the reason oil paint was invented, which I've always taken as both a poetic and art historical fact. Oil paint, internally luminescent because of the polymerization of the oil around the pigment it supports and intensifies, is better at representing living surfaces than fresco or tempera. But there's also marble to consider. It too proposes an internal luminosity for itself. It too, as sculpture, can suggest a comparable image of mobile vitality, *i.e.*, living mobility, although unlike oil paint, perhaps, it can't propose itself as a skin as opposed to a mass. In *2 as 3 and some* surface is brought as close as possible to the mass which supports it, while being independent of it in the sense that skin is in principle separable from the body which bears it. The idea of skin arrives with the application of gesso, turning the mass into a support for a surface, which in its turn supports two layers of paint, the one underneath inflecting the one on top, and repeating in its relationship to it the lack of symmetry between the colour of the sculpture and its geometrical structure. The colours underneath the blue and brown and grey are orange, green, and magenta. Strong, bright secondary colours which were applied with a

sequence of their own which links, and also causes internal disjunction or change within, the colours which cover them. It is then the case that within itself, in the relationship between final colour and the underpainting, the colour repeats the relationship between the final colour and the sculpture itself. In both instances, the final colour is inflected by but itself inflects what supports it. This is less a relationship of contradiction than of logical extension, its origins in Lerner's beginning by making the geometric defer to the organic, presenting the idea of the cube as something made out of lines which are anything but straight. As to the colour, it is by definition naturalistic – the colour of skies and trees and filled with the whiteness of the atmospheric, therefore an exterior colour.

As such, it refers as much to space as to form, which is in any case a property of colour as such. Its inherent spatiality is indeed one of the two obvious reasons why colour could never be reducible to the surface which bears it, the other being that the latter could in principle be painted any colour at all. Leading to space rather than form in that it offers an impression of depth rather than shape – surface replacing shape and in its turn giving way to space – and in its implicit irreducibility, as a detachable property, to the shapes and surfaces it inhabits, colour is a necessary accompaniment of forms – to see form is to see colour or its absence – which at the same time can't be seen to originate in form, and for that reason above all can't be controlled or subsumed by it or its connotations, an uncontrollability or separate logic emphasised in *2 or 3 as some* by the colour's independence of the cubes' internal and collective geometric ordering.

In *Devex Yellow* this is taken further. Here colour can't readily be seen even as a surface, except to the extent that one can separate its vehicle from what the colour does. I think of this as the Monet effect. It was where the nineteenth century saw the world dematerialize before its very eyes in the course of an intense visualization of the act of seeing. Again, Lerner brings to bear a pictorial possibility on a sculptural idea which in every other respect has everything to do with what only sculpture can. A pile of things, strung together in an order which becomes invisible once the sculpture takes its final shape, which is itself bound up in an action (gesture) as the beginning and end of what is for that reason not entirely^lcomprehensible (subject to being accounted for) as a thing.

A bunch of loops sitting on a line which loops, obliquely, out of the wall: that's what one sees as far

as the work's appearance as a thing and a trace of activity is concerned. A mass of yellow which, as such, has nothing whatsoever to do with loops or looping: that's also seen to be present, as a phenomenon independent of the work's reduction to thingness. The form as thing or action (a trace in both instances) has little or nothing to do with the same form as colour (formlessness applied to form). I began by talking about Larner's works as combining appearance (a recognizable trace of action) with phenomena (presence irreducible to what bears it while being, unlike appearance, completely as opposed to partially there, as colour must and things cannot be). As such, it is a combining which has nothing to do with reducing one to the terms of the other, and everything to do with seeing what they're like given their quite distinct zones of operation. It seems that appearance and phenomena are each elusive, but in different ways. The one never wholly present but rather containing in itself the notion of the concealed – the interior, the back, the unrevealed as the frame of the revealed – and the other entirely intangible in its absolute and total presentness.

Larner takes a very direct approach to two conditions of eluding, whose separate and distinct teleologies cause them not so much to elude one another as to simply never intersect, except to the extent that their being simultaneously – as it were in parallel – active in the same object as a kind of intersecting. It's with this in mind that I turn, in conclusion, to two earlier works.

One could, in talking about *2 of 3 and some*, discuss Larner's use of materials as symptomatic of certain generalities which have come to be accepted about art and the gender or women's question. Such a discussion might want to see the materials she uses as tactical reactions to not wanting to use something else: *papier-mâché* as a domestic, light, and unpretentious alternative to marble, which is automatically bombastic and pretentious, that being how the contemporary regards the heroic; and watercolour, traditionally derided as the chosen or patriarchally allocated material of gentlewomen's art societies, as opposed to oil paint, which had similar connotations to those just associated with marble and was as such the chosen medium of those who, quite often not gentlemen, were absurdly determined to associate art itself with what they perceived to be the virtues and capacities of men as opposed to women. But, just as one may no longer use Freud as other than a code with a conventional, and to that extent unreal, relationship to the world rather than a straightforward, or natural, one,

in an era when all sorts of burly, or punkish (the passive-aggressive alternative), chaps knit and sew thoroughly critiqued and reconstituted images of regression for exhibition in museums, such a line of argument becomes one about the deployment of a semiotic which cannot possibly function convincingly at its face value precisely because its terms have become so instituted. I have therefore confined myself up until now to commenting on the care with which Lerner makes things without engaging in speculation about the obvious. However I'm very fond of the obvious, which James Joyce said was the most important and difficult thing to get into the work of art, and want to turn to it now.

Like *To the Wall* (1990), *Lash Matte* (1990) is made of recognizable references to the figure. Significantly, I should say, to the figure's extremities. *Lash Matte* is made out of lots and lots of dark (false) eyelashes (I think of it for this reason as the Anything but Nordic Girls piece). A curious part of the anatomy, almost without discernable form and certainly without weight, line as form if ever there was such a thing, by definition about repetition, always associated with the concept of the attractive (and therefore subject to the aesthetic terror of too this or not enough that), eyelashes are what frame the eye while being absolutely unlike it: dry as opposed to wet and multiple as opposed to singular, and not even pretending to provide access to anything. There are quite a few examples of earlier boy art with which this might be compared, Bob Morris's felt pieces – founded in a pun about phenomena, as Joyce used to have a map of County Cork made out of cork on his wall – and also John McCracken's beautifully finished plank sculptures, perhaps the last word in the flawless as the impenetrable but irresistible – come to think of it a traditionally feminine theme, not only in the minds of the allegedly masculine – are two. The first comparison draws one's attention to the place of the meticulous and of variety in Lerner, which distinguishes her from Morris, but also to her predilection for the provisional, which unites her with him, the other to her concern for surface as that which is not reducible to structure while being, as is McCracken's, something one wants to stare at for a long time. I should compare looking at *Lash Matte* to the attention one comes to pay to the surface in *2 or 3 and some*, and point out a shared combination of delicacy and the meticulous in the way it's applied in each. I cannot see how one could avoid an associated recognition, which is that the charm of false eyelashes always has something to do with the care with which they've been applied, as well as to what. I said at the

beginning that Larner's use of appearance and phenomena does not reduce to an opposition between the figural and the abstract, and it is those of her works which refer to the figure most directly which demonstrate that most clearly.

They do so by confirming an underlying truth about sculpture while subsuming its implications into sculptural terms, so that the figural refers to the sculptural rather than the other way around. The underlying truth is that sculpture shares a ground with, and is continuous with the space of, its viewer, and is for that reason always figural in the way that architecture is and painting and music need not be. The space of the figure is always there. That is, to a considerable degree, the space sculpture makes visible as well as the space within which it lives and works. As such one is always seeing it in terms of embodiment where the body in question is a human one, as I have discussed *2 or 3 and some* in terms of skin and structure and mass and movement. In this sense appearance in sculpture is recognised as a bodily presence. In *Lash Matte* this is turned back on itself far more thoroughly than in *2 or 3 and some*. There is no body, just a surface with associations to an hypothetical body, which by convention would not be masculine. The body represented by a detachable extension which, like the colour in *2 or 3 and some*, lives in front of the face as much if not more than in it – and as pure surface without mass, this work has more to do with the face than with the body, pure frontality and conceived as mobility, the language of the eyelash.

I end then with an observation about the development of the (possibly feminine) figural space of Larner's abstract sculpture. *To the Wall* is a symmetrical piece. It fits in a corner, and is about as shallow as a person – 13 ½", 33.7 cm. It recedes into and in that describes, makes visible, that space and at the middle, which is also the bottom of each of the metal curves out of which it's made, there are little bits of kid leather, flesh-coloured leather which function associatively in a manner comparable to the eyelashes in *Lash Matte*, and which mark the centre of the piece and a progression upwards and inward towards the corner. *Devex Yellow*, also a corner piece, is (as has been said) obliquely orientated and the line, which one begins to think of as a belt, which loops out from the wall is not symmetrical and one sees the work as decentred in its relation to the corner. In general, as I've suggested, line has here given way to mass, and to see it in terms of decentredness would than mean that the line of the

corner was operating in relation to a mass which was independent of it where in the earlier work it had been the furthestmost recession of a form otherwise expressed entirely in lines. At the same time, as I've also said, the mass in question is a weightless one, produced by colour's independence of its material context (phenomena's independence of form) in *Devex Yellow*, where it was just as weightless but a product of (hard and soft, steel and kid leather) linearity in *To the Wall*. In this later work colour combines with a refusal of symmetry to produce a form which contradicts the space which it inhabits and describes, the yellow loops making a stack which doesn't end up in the corner bracketed by the work's support. If sculpture may make space visible by dematerializing objects – through careful attention to their objectness – what kind of dematerialization one gets, and what one sees that as, depends on the kinds of materials the dematerializing in question employs. I should say that in much of her work Larner has tended to make bluntness realize itself (which could also be to say, lose itself) in delicacy, and now she's got it to a stage where its identity as a thing is constantly eluded by its presence as a space filled with colour's weightless subversion of the actual (the real's banal ideal), an effect reinforced by her detaching line from symmetry. When is the body not symmetrical? When it's moving. When it's visibly being in time. Which is to say that movement visualized would be time presented as spatial and in space, as a property which, like colour, lies within and in front (and beside and behind) everything. In Larner's most recent works one may no longer be talking about making space visible, but about making visible that upon which visibility depends.

Jürg Laederach

On Liz Larner

A Protean seeker after tension, she is active as the spermatozoic moulder of all materials at once. Uncertainty arises as to whether she intends to show (in the sense of emphasize) the objects already in this world, transformed but directly meant – an endless task, predicated on the notion that the world is no good at doing its own PR – or else, by complementing the sum of objects to date with others out of her own head, to produce a critique of the extant object-collection that is the world. The principle being this: there is plenty out there, but also plenty that Creation has overlooked, and therefore plenty still to invent and to add in. Liz Larner has so much in reserve that she has to store it away, thriftily, in preserving jars; at the same time, it seems that the mass of work before her lends wings to her capacious clutches and magnifies her objects. She is overcome by calmness – and these are her best moments. In evident peace of mind, she tackles an overly slack or overly rigid spatial situation, which fails to make her point, by dealing a well-placed death-blow to all repose and stasis. Liz Larner knows the extent of the world as collection. Her work of criticism, emphasis and augmentation, in which collection generates objects, is thoroughly impressive.