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LaBarge, Emily. "Liz Larner and the Shape of Nothing." Erieze (July 30, 2026) [ill.]
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FRIEZE

Liz Larner and the Shape of Nothing

The artist gives palpable form to absence while exploring the
space where opposites coexist and remain in tension



This piece appears in the columns section of frieze 261, 'Detritus'

There is a statement people often quote – no doubt you’ve heard it, or at least some version – about the possibility of holding two opposing things simultaneously in one’s mind without irritation, doubt or angling for resolution. How it is a particular kind of intelligence (‘first-rate’, some have said, a little dated) or a special capacity in itself (a ‘negative capability’, entrancing but abstruse). This is commonly held to relate to ideas or concepts or practical realities: it seems we believe it must be difficult for humans to accept contradiction, whether accidental or wilful, though it is around us everywhere in abundance. But form, materiality, is perhaps no different: it is fluid; the possibilities are endless. With art, we might look to genre, discipline or medium for fixity and boundaries,

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to titles for explanation or clarity. But some practices artfully plumb the opposite of precision, offering capaciousness as the most meaningful mode of making.



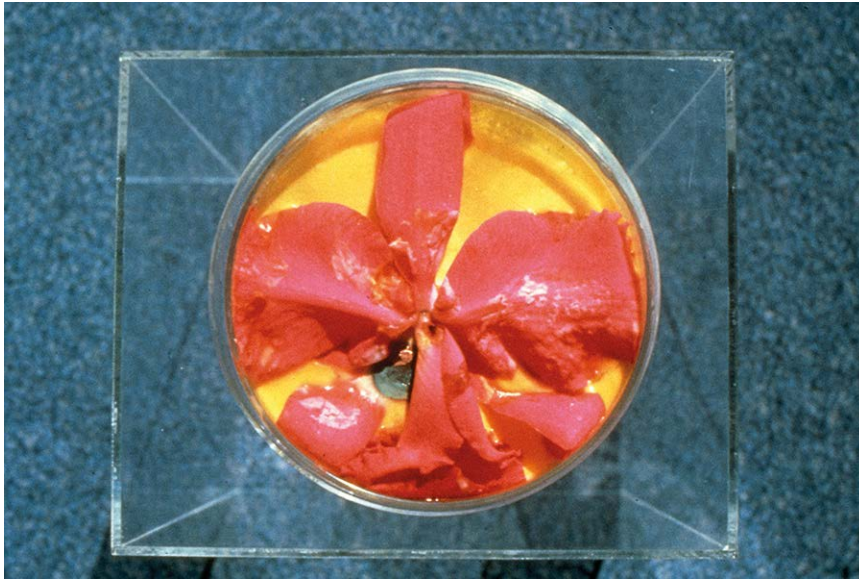
Liz Larner, *Two or Three or Something*, 1999. Courtesy: © Liz Larner, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Galerie Max Hetzler, London/Paris/Berlin; photograph: the artist

‘There is a slippage between what something is called, what something is, what we perceive, and what something means,’ the American sculptor Liz Larner said in a 2016 interview for *Forbes*, giving a sense of her mobile ways of thinking about and making art. Born in Sacramento in 1960, Larner has long been a denizen of the Los Angeles area, having attended California Institute of the Arts in Valencia in the mid-1980s and later becoming a respected teacher at Pasadena’s ArtCenter College of Design. Profiles or artist biographies commonly introduce her by listing the extensive variety of her materials (mirrors, living trees, aluminium, surgical gauze, false eyelashes, rope, stainless steel, leather, Plexiglas, ceramic, plastic, stones, bronze, minerals, aircraft cables, padlocks, watercolour, silk, nylon, volcanic ash, lodestones, trinitrotoluene [TNT], ammonium nitrate, bacterial cultures – the list could continue), as if her practice is best defined by its heterogeneity.

But something – and not just the artist and viewer – is missing from these seductive inventories that summon impossible images, conflicting textures and erratic movement.

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And it's not because Lerner is a conceptual artist, either. What is missing is what is missing – but what to call this? We might name this condition, this negative space so foundational to Lerner's art, a descriptive 'lack', an unavoidably Freudian term that the famously non-feminist Viennese doctor used to describe womankind, who, missing penile genitalia, spend the rest of their lives seeking it. While it is true that a good man is perennially hard to find, some of us consider lack a fruitful presence filled with potential, because you really don't know what you don't know, and that's reason enough, if you need one, to keep making (and living).



Liz Lerner, *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny* (detail), 1987. Courtesy: © Liz Lerner, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Galerie Max Hetzler, London/Paris/Berlin; photograph: the artist

What might this mean in practical terms? Let's say: a set of petri dishes enclosing three items that are left to change, as all things do in enclosed spaces, to produce bacteria and ultimately to die (*Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny*, 1987). Or a series of ceramic smiles, jagged and of varying sizes: a mouth but not quite, just the interior, the negative, like Alice's riddling Cheshire Cat who fades into the night, leaving only his grin ('Smile', 1996–2010). Or a looping, wayward cuboid structure whose corners are not quite corners: a minimalist experiment gone awry, a shape that is not sure what shape it is, a title that refuses to commit (*Two or Three or Something*, 1998–99). Or a wall-mounted, formalist sculpture made of refuse (plastic bottles emptied by Lerner's household) that shines with its hollowness, its uselessness made useful, rendered art rather than detritus, refusing its otherwise inevitable end as pollution (*hard bubble*, 2021).

'New forms look like things that we don't recognize, that there aren't yet words for. They are invisible to most of us. I try to see them but probably miss a lot of them, even though they're all around,' the artist said in a 2022 *Artnet* interview on the occasion of her retrospective at New York's SculptureCenter, which would then travel to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Lerner has been compared to the German-born US artist Eva

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Hesse, similarly known for her unconventional materials and uncategorizable forms – sculptures that refuse to conform to sculpture proper. Hesse described her work, in a 1969 exhibition statement, as similarly aiming to achieve lack or absence: ‘I wanted to get to non art, non connotative, non anthropomorphic, non geometric, non, nothing, everything, but of another kind, vision, sort [...] it is something, it is nothing. Non, non, non, something, nothing.’ The double negative, fulsome, explodes. Non, lack, absence, void, maybe even negative capability: a series of words (another slippery, ongoing list) that offer themselves to the invisible forms we don’t yet recognize and for which no language exists.



Liz Larner, *Bird in Space*, 1989, installation view, Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 1991. Courtesy: © Liz Larner, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Galerie Max Hetzler, London/Paris/Berlin

Of *Bird in Space*, her 1989 work made of nylon cord and silk, fastened in arcs to the walls and floor with stainless steel, Larner told the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2019 that she had imagined it as ‘the freedom of a woman or a girl being in space and still dependent, still attached to her surroundings’. Named after Constantin Brâncuși’s famous series of solid, anchored bronze and marble works (1923–40), Larner’s *Bird* is, if not the opposite, then decidedly non. Imperceptible at certain angles, it is so pale, so fine, so high-flying that it gives you the itching, restless feeling, akin to pain (but it must be a *douleur exquise*), that birds are said to have before migrating, to which flight is the

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only resolution. It embodies what Larner describes in the 2022 interview as 'feminist forms': 'Something that can accommodate its own indeterminacy. Something capable of adaptation.' Of course, the viewer has to be willing to do the same.

'Liz Larner: A hard line to bend' is on view at Camden Art Centre, London, from 11 September 2026 to 17 January 2027

This article first appeared in frieze issue 261 with the headline 'Something, Nothing'
Main image: Liz Larner, smile (alluvium), 2010-11. Courtesy: © Liz Larner, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Galerie Max Hetzler, London/Paris/Berlin