

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Losing Ourselves in Liz Larner's Shapeshifting Sculpture

By approaching sculpture as an open-ended experience of embodiment, Larner provokes us to repeatedly lose and locate ourselves in her work.

By Cassie Packard. March 20, 2022



Installation view of Liz Larner, "Corner Basher" (1988) in Liz Larner: Don't put it back like it was at SculptureCenter, New York (all images © Liz Larner, photos by Cathy Carver)

I was recently listening to an Anne Carson lecture on corners. Given at CUNY in 2018, the poet-classicist's talk floatily triangulated between the introduction of a third actor in Sophoclean plays (corners move narrative forward), her father's inability to orient himself amid mounting dementia (corners help us locate ourselves), and the corner as a form beyond the dialectic of inside and outside, or shelter and threat (corners are spatially distinct and psychologically freighted). I was drawn to the idea of moving the corner to the center, of recasting a space typically viewed as dustily incidental as a fulcrum of action.

The gravity that Carson ascribes to corners sprang to mind when I encountered "Corner Basher" (1988), the first work — before the check-in desk, even — in Los Angeles-based sculptor Liz Larner's most significant survey in more than 20 years, Liz Larner: Don't put it back like it was at SculptureCenter. Among the earliest of the 28 artworks on view, which span from 1987 to 2021, "Corner Basher" activates a space that is normally invisible. The kinetic sculpture, which resembles a treacherous tetherball set, features a steel pole with a dangling metal ball hooked up to an electric motor. By flipping a switch and rotating a dial on an adjacent column, visitors to the space — with varying degrees of aggression, glee, and

bemusement — can set the piece in motion, causing it to repeatedly wallop the walls of the corner in which it stands, at a range of velocities. As more people operate the machine over the course of time, the wall increasingly, incrementally, and a bit bathetically, crumbles into pieces on the floor. Conceived as a sly rejoinder to the macho-coded destructive robots of Mark Pauline’s performance collective Survival Research Laboratories, Larner’s collaborative “Corner Basher” literally lays the museum’s structure bare in a work of participatory institutional critique.



Liz Larner, “Wrapped Corner” (1991), installation view.



Installation view, *Liz Larner: Don't put it back like it was*, SculptureCenter, New York. Left: “Out of Touch” (1987). Right: “Bird in Space” (1989)

In the nearby “Wrapped Corner” (1991), gleaming chains, turnbuckles, and brackets are kinkily pulled tight around the corner edge of a room in horizontal rows; “Too the Wall” (1990) features six delicately jointed steel and silver armatures, each holding a pale square of leather, suspended across a corner in increasingly taut tiers. These site-responsive drawings in space highlight the physical and social context in which the art and the viewer are situated, and, particularly by centering the anti-heroic corner, pose questions about the values that are reflected in both our built environments and the ways in which we move through those environments (or, show art in them). The feminist thrust of this undertaking is made overt in “Bird in Space” (1989): a reinterpretation of the (white, male) Romanian modernist Constantin Brancusi’s famous 1923 sculpture of a bird in flight, a pedestal-mounted phallic abstraction made from marble or bronze. Larner’s own abstract avian, its outstretched wings the size of the room, is constructed from bowed lengths of humble nylon cord held tensile between steel blocks. Slipping in and out of visibility based on the viewer’s position, this sweeping anti-monument asks gallery-goers to recognize where they stand and what they notice: to engage in the relatively unpolished and unsexy, intermittently rewarding, ongoing project of parsing the artworks’ nuances and thinking relationally.

“I like to think of the viewer as more of a *sensor*, a being using every sense to understand an object,” said Larner in an interview with Mary Ceruti for the exhibition catalogue. Larner’s varied work allows us to feel our way toward meaning, often physically moving in the process. It can be difficult to identify, as the artist put it in a recent interview with Jeffrey Kastner, a traditional “throughline” in her oeuvre (despite the art historical record’s repeated attempts to shoehorn her into post-minimalism). The pieces in the show are wildly disparate, ranging from abstract to figurative and from microscopic to massive, executed in media as diverse as false eyelashes, bronze, porcelain, leather, and steel. They reflect a body of work with a slippery habit of shapeshifting, characterized by a commitment to an active viewing experience and materiality itself, rather than any one material or aesthetic.



Liz Larner, “Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny” (1987)



Liz Larner, “smile (after dark)” (2009), installation view

Larner, who graduated from CalArts with a BFA in photography in 1985, found her way to sculpture organically, via bacterial cultures that she had been cultivating with nutrient agar in petri dishes. Though she initially produced these experiments to photograph them, the artist became interested in letting them unfold as process works in three-dimensional space, giving rise to the cleverly titled *Cultures* series (1987-ongoing). In “Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny” (1987), the titular items decompose — altering one another’s chemical compositions in the process — in two petri dishes encased in glass atop a pedestal. “Primary, Secondary: Culture of Empire State Building and Twin Towers” (1988), a landscape to the former still life, is an architectonic glass-and-aluminum display of two petri dishes with colorful, crispy material grown from cultures taken at those corporate, seemingly inorganic locations. Exploring representation on a literal, material level, these works set biochemical assemblages into motion, evincing Larner’s early interest in symposies and an exploratory, collaborative approach to making that is also at the heart of “Corner Basher.”

Encountering the solitary “smile (after dark)” (2009), a somewhat ominous, inky length of shiny porcelain upturned at the corners, conjures up Alice’s wonderment: “I’ve often seen a cat without a grin, but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!” From 1996 to 2011, Larner labored on the *smile* series, a group of abstracted, disembodied grins made from casting foamcore forms in porcelain, a material also used in dental

veneers. “smile (after dark)” is hollow, literally. Its unevenly faceted, intermittently lacerated surface makes it difficult to discern the inside from the outside (like a corner), prompting the viewer to scrutinize a detached gesture that is seen as shorthand for joy but so often contains grimacing gradations of ambivalence, obligation, resentment, or anger — perhaps particularly among people repeatedly told to smile.



Liz Larner, “inflexion” (2013), installation view

Larner, who lives and works in the birthplace of the anti-utilitarian California Clay Revolution, has since turned to the softer, more porous medium of ceramics, her focus throughout the past decade. Like the *Cultures*, ceramics inherently require the artist to cede a measure of authorship to nature and entropy: after the clay, teeming with microorganisms, is dug from the earth, worked, and shaped, it hardens into being in the kiln — cracking and warping as it sees fit — outside of the artist’s sight and out of her hands. A sequence of large, wall-mounted ceramic lozenges, begun in 2013, line a lower-level hallway. Glazed or painted in arresting hues and titled after geological phenomena, they include “subduction” (2013), a deep, shifting well of indigo; “inflexion” (2013), a blue morpho butterfly’s shimmering azure; and “vi (calefaction)” (2015), a navy ombre studded with chunky stones and minerals to a celestial effect. Alluding to the fault lines that run through fired clay and earth alike, each thick slab is intractably cracked, from hairline fissures and crumbling edges to clean rips down the middle, visual pauses that riff on Barnett Newman’s zip paintings. The viewer slips, unsettled, between art historical time and geological time; micro and macro; chance and intention; nature and culture.

Through a longstanding practice of regarding her materials and audience as her co-creators, and approaching sculpture as an open-ended experience of embodiment rather than a static or foreclosed object, Larner provokes us to repeatedly lose and locate ourselves in her work. The inner unsteadiness — the searching — that this push-and-pull sets in motion is the main event.

Liz Larner: Don’t put it back like it was continues at SculptureCenter (44-19 Purves St, Long Island City, Queens) through March 28 and will travel to the Walker Art Center (725 Vineland Place, Minneapolis, Minnesota) from April 30 to September 4. The exhibition was curated by Mary Ceruti; the SculptureCenter presentation is curated by Kyle Dancewicz.