

Liz Larner
by Jane Dickson



Chained Perspective: Reversed, Reflected at Kunsthhaus Graz, 2006, steel, chrome-plated steel and mirrors, dimensions variable. Installation view of *Two or Three or Something: Maria Lassnig and Liz Larner* at the Kunsthhaus Graz, Austria.

Liz Larner is an alchemist whose cryptic admixtures of materials, space and words jangle each other to life and trigger reverberating cascades of associations. These are sly works. At first glance they appear so simple and humble that your brain wants to quickly file them as a heap of tubes, or chains, a grid, a piece of crumpled plastic, but not quite, and looking back, the work clarifies exactly what you've seen—and that's when you're drawn into the tangle of unexpected juxtapositions, the uncanny feeling of the familiar going strange. You look to the titles for clarification, but there again, things begin by appearing deceptively casual. Larner's titles are usually brief, humorous and evocative. For example, *I Thought I Saw a Pussycat* references not just Looney Tunes but also the subjectivity of perception. Taking that clue back to the sculpture's tangle of translucent plastic links, you witness the time-release process of the work's unfolding, its meanings oscillating between object, title and the world beyond.

A midcareer survey of Larner's oeuvre started at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2001, and her work was featured this spring at Kunsthhaus Graz, Austria. Her sculpture *RBWs* was displayed center stage at this year's Whitney Biennial.

Jane Dickson I've wanted to interview you for a long time, because while our work may seem to come from different planets, our [+ Share](#) the psychology of space, of color, gender, the use of non-art materials, the use of illusion and perspective, and the uncanny intersect in interesting ways. Your work has many layers of meaning and, while we can't, in words, *spell* any of it out, I'd like to know how you might guide us to interpret it. First, why did you choose sculpture as your primary means of expression after you studied photography? How did that transition occur?

Liz Larner I don't really want to guide people's interpretation of the work, but I can let you know what I think about it. The issues around photography at the time I was at Cal Arts in the early '80s made me want to deal with our world spatially and materially, but not as an architect. Sculpture takes on many of the same problems as architecture, but for different reasons. For me it is a medium that can address how our world is produced and the factors that go into forming it. Because of this I feel there is a potential poetics in sculpture that is closely connected to our world as the context we inhabit.

JD This leads us into the question of the body. I experience your work as being about *presence* and *absence*. There's what exists—the physical object—and then there's the implied absence, the body or expectation of the viewer. There's something profoundly physical about the way that you exist in the world and make us aware of that through experiencing your work.

LL That is the way I exist; I don't think of the work as self-portraiture, although other people have suggested that to me. In a general sense, the work is about being in the world. Different pieces engage different aspects of this, *doing* it at the same time as *being* in it. You know, I want the literal, the metaphorical and the theatrical. I want others who are in the room with

the work to feel that. To know that they're thinking about it, but also to have it just be happening to them. When I was younger, one of the first things I found so beautiful about art was that when you're there in front of it, you can just get it. It comes to you, like ESP (*laughter*). Sometimes it's SP without the E, but the extra is important too.

JD I don't see your work as self-portraiture—I do see it as you sharing a multiplicity of physical experiences.

LL The physical is important to me. It has been perceived as the lesser of the experiences. In many belief systems, the physical is considered the basest way of experiencing. To me it's interesting, because it affects us so directly, literally *structures* our space. I move through ideas concerning this with each sculpture with the kinds of materials, forms and colors I use and how they're manipulated. When I first began working, things were more conceptual: material was more about language, what something *is* and what something's *called*. I eventually wanted more than that. I wanted to have the sculpture be there as something perceived and thought. Objects, with all the problems and pleasures they bring with it.

JD You don't revel in the physical exclusively, you use the physical—it's like tantra—to express the metaphysical.

LL Yeah. And I think that the metaphysical is expressed through the physical—the Cartesian notion of the *x, y, z* plane or 3-D space has been the predominant Western way of thinking about space for the last 500 years. That has a lot to do with how things look. Now the string theorists are suggesting that there may be 12 or more dimensions. What does this look like? Are we living this yet? We are a bit—the grid is being questioned. Other sorts of shapes are being used now that would have been impossible before computer modeling. The metaphysical really does produce physical space. Actually, through the way we build, and ideologically, as is evidenced in what actually gets built. If objects in physical space question or work with that or maybe aren't an easy fit because they are not necessarily based on signs and signifiers—but are spatial—

JD Didn't you study philosophy before you went to art school?

LL I didn't finish my BA in philosophy, but it was my major for three years.

JD I always get the feeling that you have grounding, not just in the trendy French philosophers that all art students have had to study in the last few decades, but also in Philosophy 101.

LL Art encompasses philosophy, psychology, humor, politics, physics—a way of being able to talk about anything, while at the same time involving this thrill of perception. This openness was something that I wanted to be a part of—you know?



Orchid, Buttermild, Penny, 1987. From the *Cultures* series. All images courtesy of the artist and Regan Projects, Los Angeles.

JD I do. Back to E, S and P: let's talk about wordplay in your titles.

LL I still do that with the titles. When I first started making sculpture—this had to do with my education and the times—it wasn't that far from the conceptual practice of the '70s. I was intrigued with what something is perceived as and what it's called. The *Culture* pieces were involved with the doubling of a meaning, and the unraveling and remaking of that doubling in order to take it into other kinds of thinking.

JD Because they're cultures of bacteria that also reflect on culture.

LL That was the dumb pun inspiring me at the time (*laughter*). But the pun was also generative. There seemed to be room to make comments back and forth between what we think of as the rigidity and correctness of language as science, and language as poetry; and objects as factual and present and real, and objects as poetry.

JD These were pieces where you combine various elements in petri dishes with—

LL Agar. I would color the agar red, yellow and blue. It is a *medium*—a nutrient medium. The bacteria would be introduced to the medium in the dish, and it would ingest the nutrients suspended in the media and grow or culture; this produced colors called *blooms*. These are scientific terms. An endless generative back-and-forth between those different kinds of cultures was what I was after, but what I didn't anticipate initially was that death would eventually have to be part of it. The *Cultures* have life spans and then they become dead matter and start to break down. The name stayed more solid than the actual material. The titles of the *Cultures* are what they are cultured from. *NATO a Potato and the Republic of Plato* is one I still like a lot—it hangs together so much better than even the object, which now, strangely enough, has disappeared. I don't know where that piece is. I have a photo of it, I have the name of it, but I no longer know where the object is or if it still exists.

JD Which brings me to the question of impermanence, and the question of time. Were the bacterial culture pieces shown as photographs, or were they actually shown culturing in the gallery?

LL They were shown culturing in the gallery, but the very first ones I did, which were more combines in scientific containers, I took photos of and have shown those. Sometimes I would send instructions, and people would "culture" as a performance. In the beginning they were in petri dishes, but then I started building bases for the dishes and those became more sculptural. Eventually it changed into my wanting to make sculptures without having the cultures in them, but still dealing with issues of combining elements. In the *Cultures* the bacteria were feeding off the same mediums and making a certain amount of poetic sense, so I decided to ditch the purposeful introduction of the bacteria and keep on with the rest of it.

JD So instead of an either/or oppositional dichotomy, you're approaching it as this and that, soft *and* hard rather than soft *or* hard.

LL Yes. Penny Florence says about the work, "This brings me to the first of a kind of reversal through doubles that is yet not an opposition." (1) That's a nice tip of an iceberg.

JD The uneasy rubbing up against each other of these presumed-to-be opposites, how they coexist and influence each other. I think people feel embarrassed to acknowledge that they feel both ways about something. It's harder and harder to create a space where potentially conflicting elements of any kind can coexist. This is a part of your increasing political relevance at the moment.

I wanted to ask you about this issue of impermanence, particularly in your early work, like the flower-shaped floor piece made of cut mirrors, *Between Loves Me and Loves Me Not*. Do you store that piece or do you re-create it each time you show it?

LL Oh no, that piece has never been re-created, and I've shown it a number of times. It's thick, one-inch glass and very heavy duty; it has its own crate—

JD So, it is permanent, even though the image of a mirror is of something fragile and temporary.

LL What's impermanent about that piece is what it reflects, and I think you are right: the *image* of a mirror is of something fragile. This piece sits on the floor, so it does the same thing as all mirrors do, reflecting the atmosphere and movement or lack thereof around them, but it reflects from an unusual perspective.

JD How about the sideways live tree piece? *Park*.

LL Well, that's also an idea that has a perceptual relation to *Between Loves Me and Loves Me Not*, in that it is made from a bloom of a Century Plant, which is generally seen as a vertical element in the landscape, but for *Park* the bloom is set horizontally so it is a different perspective on a figure that makes up a big part of the Southwestern landscape. *Park* is a

temporary garden and can be set up anywhere for however long. The first installation of it was halfway inside a garage at the Mackey Apartments, which were designed by R. M. Schindler and now house a residency program run by the MAK in Los Angeles. Right now it's up at Eric Bonwit's compound in Malibu, which is an artwork in itself.



Park, 1996, Agave Americana, concrete and plant material, 40 feet long.
Installation view at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001-2002. Photo by Joshua White.

JD You moved into a different kind of impermanence in *Bird in Space*. It's not exactly about life and death, but about tension and fragility. *Bird in Space* and the chain works remind me of each other because they are both linear tensile structures.

LL It's both permanence and impermanence. It reflects back to the physical and how we have to deal with that on so many different levels—in cities, as bodies . . . and also illusionistic renderings of space in 2-D. The chain pieces and *Bird in Space* fight against gravity; there's a lot of tension that creates load on the building or the armature or whatever the chains, or ropes in *Bird in Space*, are attached to, so there's a constant friction, without movement but the force of it is tangible. It's about an old sculptural idea of balance: if the tension's too strong it will actually rip out that part of the building that the chain or rope is pulling on. If the tension is too loose, the lines are going to droop and the buoyancy of the loft of the line will be lost. The tension is a balance between what will hold the chains or ropes tight and what the structure can take to maintain that tension. It's very tentative, but it's a constant expression of that. *Bird in Space* is also another kind of expression of flight than Brancusi's aerodynamic solid.

JD We've skipped over *Corner Basher*.

LL Strangely enough, there's renewed interest in those works. *Chain Perspective* was just shown in Graz and will be shown again along with *Corner Basher* in a show coming up in the fall.

JD *Corner Basher* came before the *Chain Perspective* piece, right?

LL Yeah, '88. It was almost right after the *Cultures*. Getting real physical! (*laughter*)

JD Was *Corner Basher* about fighting or embracing decay, among other things? I mean, it embraces destruction, but as I read it, it's not a nihilistic piece but sort of heroic.

LL It is both of those things. *Corner Basher* is a machine on wheels that is usually positioned in a corner. Sometimes it is chained to the corner and sometimes not. It is a column with a ball and chain attached to it. The column is coupled to a drive shaft that is driven by a variable-speed motor. This allows the column to spin, and the faster it goes the more the ball at the end of the chain swings out from the column and usually the more it bashes the corner. The motor is controlled by a speed control and an on/off switch that is set up about 20 feet away from the corner, so it is up to the audience to turn the thing on or off and speed it up or down. The piece reminds me a lot of driving a car—here's all this freedom and it's a potential killing machine; it's a paradoxical object. The marks that are made on the walls are the result of a group effort, a group drawing by whoever works with the installation, all the different people and their approaches to it. You know, fast/slow, on/off, all the in-betweens of that, as well as whatever the wall is made of and whatever might be underneath that—it is a

subtractive process in that way. The marks could never be duplicated. The spontaneous choreography of how it got made is too complicated—like lots of drawings and objects. It's not controlled by me, and it is not automatic. Operating it or observing it being operated is a very visceral experience. It is an amplification of the body, like most machines and tools; you know, one little twist of a knob 20 feet away and a person can make this machine wail away or turn the last user's wailing off or slow it down. Amplification of our power is such a part of our world now, it is kind of invisible. The potentials are extreme—this metal ball on a motorized turnstile that can go frighteningly fast or can be graceful and lobbing and not even touch the wall.

JD How did that lead to *No M No D Only S and B*, which is made of punching bags, so it seems to be about similar issues except that it's inert and abject?

LL It's not punching bags; it looks like punching bags, because it's leather and dark in color. It is very abject-looking. I think it's their weight—it's obvious that they are quite heavy when you are in the room with them.

JD They're different sizes, right?

LL They're all about the same. The three of them are made from basically the same pattern but with slight variations due to cutting the pattern larger or smaller. One end is more punching-bag-looking, and the other end is more like a sprout popping out of a seed. End to end, they're between 5 and 6 feet long. Together they take up the space of a really big beanbag, and the installation instructions are just to have them be entwined. The title, *No M No D Only S and B*, refers to no mother, no dad, only sister and brother. I look at each piece as its own entity, with its own subject matter, but the physical visceralness of that piece is related to the way that the *Corner Basher* makes you feel, but it's a different kind of visceralness. Just saying the word *visceralness* is making me feel kind of queasy.

JD I was thinking about *mutuality*.

LL It's good that you got that. They're intertwined.



Untitled, 2001, Fiberglass, paint and steel, edition of 3 (each unique in color), 144 × 144 × 144 inches. Photo by Joshua White.

JD Which leads us into the issue of multiplicity and systems, which runs through almost everything that you do. You have said that these are all really one organism—

LL Well, that was one of the first pieces to deal with it. *Untitled (Wall)* uses a couple thousand singular objects, different-size cubes that come together in patterns to make a multicolored wall that you can see through. As it is circumvented, the colors are perceived alternately as individual blocks of colors and as blends of color. *Untitled*, 2001, also deals with the singular and the multiple. My favorite description of it is Bill Caine's; he called it a sculpture as the process of conflict resolution. It's a sphere turning into a cube and back into a sphere again. Hopefully, when you look at it, you can never separate out those shapes individually. It can never be one thing or the other, the cube alone or the sphere alone, or any of those shapes in-between. They have to co-exist simultaneously. I wanted to make an animation as a sculpture.

My hope is that the illusion inherent in the piece is obvious and neither the fact of the object or the illusion are overwhelmed. They have to be accepted together

JD The issue of mutation goes back to the *Cultures*.

LL Yeah, the physical presence of *No M No D Only S and B* deals with mutation of life-forms and things turning into other things while still retaining what they were before.

JD I want to take these issues into the pieces you were making in 1997, when we were neighbors: *I Thought I Saw a Pussycat* and then *Two as Three and Some, Too*. I watched the unit form for *I Thought I Saw a Pussycat* evolve into the same form repeated many times. *RWBs*, the sculpture in the Whitney Biennial, is similar in that it consists of many elements of the same form. In each sculpture you use different labor-intensive processes and materials. *I Thought I Saw a Pussycat* is like an ideal form, a repeating element that appears to be mutating through color and light, even though they're actually all the same shape. In *RWBs* the pipes are exactly the same form, but they're bent all different ways and each is *dressed* uniquely, and that leads us into the discussion of gender.

LL Material is important to me. *RWBs* is composed of aluminum tubes that I got at this salvage place in Los Angeles. I think they were meant to be swimming-pool skimmers, but they were flawed, so the company couldn't use them, or maybe they were leftover stock—for whatever reason they went to the salvage yard. In this sense they were the wrong aluminum tubes, which is what makes them the *right* aluminum tubes for my sculpture. There's a direct relationship between the material I chose to make the form of the sculpture and the aluminum-tube story that brought us to war. Aluminum tubes were the only physical evidence that the administration could point to as proof of Iraq's—now we know—nonexistent nuclear weapons program. The administration said that these tubes were *only* really suited for nuclear weapons programs. Former CIA director George Tenet was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that these high-strength aluminum tubes were for rotors in uranium centrifuges that could "convert uranium gas into enriched uranium, an essential ingredient of an atomic bomb." Dick Cheney called the tubes "irrefutable evidence." (2) As it turns out, what is irrefutable about those tubes is that they would be completely ill-suited to enriching uranium. This is what I think of as the truth and lies of material and how often the truth of history comes down to an object, a material, a thing. Materials complicate and relate meaning in both our work, like your use of AstroTurf for that series of paintings about American homes and neighborhoods. Sometimes I feel like I'm looking at someone's house through a hedge, and in other paintings the nap of the artificial turf feels like black-velvet painting in black light.



RWBs, 2005, aluminum tubes, steel and nylon aircraft cable, brass- and chrome-plated steel padlocks, natural and synthetic fabrics, 82 x 117 inches.

JD Since Cubism, sculptors have felt free to use all kinds of non-art materials for their inherent references. Painting has lagged behind in exploring that. I get so excited in Home Depot looking at 10-foot-wide infinite rolls of carpet and van-lining felt in beautiful colors and textures.

But back to *RWBs*. Why is the title plural? The sculpture seems an exaggeration of the dichotomy of the traditionally masculine—the aluminum pipes are metal and totally phallic—but they're encased, dressed in these cute, lacy, velvet fabric sleeves that you've sewed. So

you've got the female and the male, the perceived opposites coexisting again.

LL *RWBs* refers to the colors red, white and blue. The "s" makes it read *Red White and Blues* or *Reds Whites and Blues*. The colors red, white and blue do not act like any other set of colors; the combination is too emblematic. These colors signify before they do anything else. That is one of the layers and the aesthetic questions of the piece. The idea was to gather different kinds of fabric and make it into coverings for the tubes that would reference everything from NASCAR to flag-draped coffins, although I didn't use any national flags to make the fabric sleeves. In other words, making as many references as I could to the plethora of uses of these colors: cheerleading outfits; gas-station flags and banners—objects and clothing that take on this emblematic color scheme and deploy it to be patriotic, or nationalistic, or to gain power, or for whatever reason that those colors are deployed.

JD As camouflage, because everyone else is wearing it!

LL Right! I'm not making a judgment; I'm just saying that they've been deployed a great deal in the last half-decade, shall we say, in all these different guises that are all agendas in themselves—and variations on gender and identity in themselves. It was like a costuming extravaganza, but the limitation was that this material had to fit over these three different widths of tubing. There were distinct little flourishes that I could do with the designs for each sleeve, and this broke up the form of each line of the aluminum tube armature, so the lines are further distorted by the colors not reiterating the line. I think this is part of what gives the piece a shivering quality that I'm pretty happy with.

JD I want to tease out the issue of gender a little further. You have a strong macho side that the *Corner Basher* and the chain pieces seem to exemplify. Then you have a typically female material side, as in your weaving works and the *Lash Mat* piece, which is aggressive, compulsive and abject at the same time, strong and frivolous and feminine. It looks in the photograph like it could be a Richard Serra drawing, and then you realize: Oh my God! It's a nine-by-one-foot field of concentrically glued false eyelashes. How long did that take to make?

LL It took quite a while. It took me and another person a few months.

JD Which brings me to ask you about the incredibly time-consuming aspect, the mind-boggling meticulousness of what you do. Is that in some way gendered? People have sometimes written about your process in terms of women's work.

LL I don't see it that way, but I also don't want to reject that, because I have an appreciation for it, but I'm not an obsessive type and don't think all women's work has to be heavily based on the hand. It depends on the woman who is doing it. I would be just as happy if I could get done in a day what usually takes months. Mostly for me it is just what I need to do to get a certain look and feel. I give my students an essay by Judith Butler, "Gender As a Performance." Her ideas about repetition and performance are really important, but the point that I think is not made enough and that we all find ourselves falling prey to is that it's oppressive for everyone, not just women, but men—the repetitious mantle that compels us to perform our respective genders "well." To do what? To succeed? To be who? And to be who why?

JD To be the most secure in your assigned stereotype—

LL Right. That's where my work is about gender; it's about trying to make that more difficult to accept, to give you a minute to think about that. So, yes, sometimes it is very feminine and sometimes it seems like it's muy macho, and then you realize it isn't quite fitting right and it isn't as pure as it seemed. I put different sensibilities together and see what happens. I like to put all of that into play.



No M No D Only S and B, 1990, leather, sand, stone, and bark, 58 x 56 x 20 inches.

JD How does your thinking evolve before you start a piece? Do you come at it from the title, or do you start with the materials, or does it vary from piece to piece?

LL It varies from piece to piece and usually has a lot to do with a show I'm planning, because I usually think of the work in groups. *RWBs* is just one piece from my show that opened in July 2004 at Regen Projects. The ideas for that show and the work I'm currently doing are inspired by, well, a lot of Joan Didion's writings, but particularly her book *Where I Was From* [Knopf/Borzoi, 2003] and John Gregory Dunne's book *The Red White and Blue* [Simon & Schuster, 1987]. Both books are to a great extent about California and California as part of America. These two books were reference material for the show. The other material that I was drawing from was my own experience as a kid: having been born in Sacramento in 1960 and growing up in Northern California during the Vietnam War, having experienced as a kid and teenager both Ronald Reagan and Jerry Brown as governors of the Golden State. In many ways I had been working on that show for the last 10 years. The *Smile* sculptures have taken that long to develop, but I've had that title for the pieces for about that long too. *RWBs* came after I had been working on it for a while, but another sculpture in the series, *High-Strength*, which I made after that show, had its title before it was made, so, it varies. The whole group of aluminum tube sculptures is about lies and an idea of sculpture existing in what we think of as *real* space because it's physical, and how lies can be told even when the thing is there as proof, but then the thing or material itself is also what disproves the lie. I like titles though, that is pretty obvious, and the work doesn't really feel finished to me without one. If I think of a really good one and the piece has been hanging around as an untitled, I will give it the title I've finally thought of, even if the work has already been shown. I respect that market cycles and artistic cycles are not the same thing and that in the end it's the artistic cycle that is important.

JD *RWBs* makes me think of mobs. I've been wanting to start painting crowds again—we're totally done with the era of the individual. That was the twentieth century, and the twenty-first century is about mobs, mob psychology, inciting mobs, going along with the crowd and not wanting to stand out from the crowd, and people bombing crowds. As a New Yorker, I take the subway after rush hour because if somebody were to blow it up, they probably will do it at rush hour, or if I see a large gathering of people, I won't go over there. Crowds are dangerous. I'm doing a series of mosaics of New Year's Eve revelers for the Times Square subway station now, so I'm thinking about crowds anyway. *RWBs* feels like its arms are waving, a fervent crowd of flag-wavers. Many people have discussed that piece as if it's about to move. It's ominous. In your earliest work time is an obvious element. Are you thinking about time in your present works?

LL Maybe in a different way, like the *times*. The present and time passing are related. The *actual-ness*, which I consider to be the truth of material, seems to be the basis of history to me; at least that is what I'm thinking about right now. They're related through some questions I have about objects and history and time. The group of work that I did before *RWBs* was based on portraits by different artists ranging in time from Fra Filippo Lippi to Karen Kilimnik; the titles are the dates of the portraits. When I put the colors of a De Kooning or an Avery painting from, say, 1952 on another artwork (an abstract linear sculpture, made in 2003), do those colors carry a sense of time with them? Are the palettes resonant of the time they were originally used, or are they timeless? In restating the date as a title for my sculpture, does that bring you to the original time the portrait was made more than the colors do, or does the

combination of the palettes and the date do that? Ideas about time are circled around in the work, like, what does it even mean? How are time and space and physical things related?

JD How about the issue of time in that we're talking about your piece that's in the Whitney Biennial right now and you were in the Biennial, what, 10 years ago?

LL That was 1989, so 17 years ago. Well, I feel lucky that I was able to show this piece in New York at this time. I'm glad this piece is in this Biennial. I feel a little more in sync with the times than I have at different periods. I'm sure this won't last, but I'm enjoying it. For a while there, it was like, "She's a neo-minimalist. She's a formalist."

JD And now they're like, "What the hell *is* she?"

LL That's fine. And I *am* a formalist, who isn't?

JD A formalist with a sense of humor.

LL I don't think you can be a formalist these days *without one*. (*laughter*)

(1) Florence, Penny. "Color, Sex and the 'Grey Mirror.' Differencing the Ego's Era." Lecture given at the symposium Zeichen der Psyche: Psychoanalytische Perspektiven zur Kunst, Kunsthhaus Graz, Austria, 2006.

(2) Barstow, David. "The Nuclear Card: The Aluminum Tube Story—A special report. How the White House Embraced Suspect Iraq Arms Intelligence," New York Times, October 3, 2004.

—Jane Dickson is a painter living in New York. She is represented by Marlborough Gallery. Her next solo exhibition will be at the Jersey City Museum in September 2006.