

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.