

Artforum

Rutland, Beau: Close-Up: Doom and Bloom

September 2013

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PRINT SEPTEMBER 2013

# CLOSE-UP: DOOM AND BLOOM

Beau Rutland on Liz Larner's *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny*, 1987



**IT MAY SEEM *RETARDAIRE***, but I'd like to have an intimate, lifelong relationship with an artwork, becoming so familiar with it that the effects of aging stand out against my memories of our initial acquaintance. Even those who don't share this ambition are likely to agree that happening upon an artwork that has been too exuberantly restored or conserved can elicit a feeling of betrayal. Perhaps art should be subject to the risks of being alive, allowed to grow old, and even, ultimately, to die. If an entire generation of process and post-Minimal artists broached this possibility—the contingency, failure, and disintegration of objecthood—Liz Larner took the idea one step further. In 1987, she began to produce a group of works loosely referred to as the “Cultures,” in which she sped up her art's life span, syncing its demise to an exhibition-length timetable. Placing unstable ecosystems inside the temperature-controlled gallery environment, Larner's “Cultures” embed a dialectic of control and chance in their sterile surroundings.

Emanating from a knowing double entendre, the works conflate seemingly opposed connotations of *culture*: art and microbiology, aesthetic undertakings and scientific procedures. In each, disparate elements—whether sour cream, heroin, or the breath of gallerist Margo Leavin—are combined in a petri dish, creating a unique complement of microorganisms that are left to bloom and spread over the course of a given show, with results ranging between stunning and unsightly. “Any combination can create a culture,” the artist once noted. Yet the particular mix used in *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny*, 1987, reveals, with a compelling mélange of logic and poetic opacity, the subtle shades of culture's inevitable decline. The work's unique amalgam of materials results in inexplicable pathos—a devastating vignette in which an exotic fuchsia cattleya orchid lies dying in its Pyrex confines as mold spores reach up from the puddle of pathogenic buttermilk below. Placed on the orchid's rightmost petal, a glistening new penny marks the date of the culture's genesis (and ultimately its deliquescence). Larner has rightly referred to the piece as “my first beautiful artwork.” Every time (and only when) it is exhibited, a new culture is produced and displayed next to the petrified remains of its previous incarnation, a doubling that amounts to the visual equivalent of a fading echo. The age difference between the two specimens during the work's most recent

showing—in an exhibition that I cocurated at Columbia University’s Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery in New York this past May—was more than two decades.

That the cultures sit atop an aggressively scraped plinth and marble base further complicates any understanding of *Orchid*, *Buttermilk*, *Penny* as a permanent and static sculpture. When the work is shown, Larner typically charges the curator or another responsible party with gathering the namesake ingredients—procuring a cattleya in New York in springtime is not necessarily an easy task—and boiling the agar, a gelatinous substance used to support bacterial growth. The final step is to place the ingredients in the dish in the proper order, close the lid, and lower a Plexiglas vitrine over the two minienvironments. Thus, while *Orchid*, *Buttermilk*, *Penny* may be construed as an instructional artwork, it is unlike such works, which are created anew for each showing: *Orchid* holds one foot steadily in the grave.

Larner actualizes the traditional role of the curator as custodian—one who is not only the guardian of but also literally cleans up after the work—and so we might begin to see her efforts as a form of institutional critique. After all, the sculpture that inspired the “Cultures” is the artist’s *Painting Paraphernalia*, 1987, a bucket containing a moldy concoction of the materials required to make an oil painting: rabbit-skin glue, turpentine, and a paintbrush. By rearranging the individual components of an artwork in a new, untenable relationship, *Painting Paraphernalia* brings to mind Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube*, 1963–65, which makes mistily visible the effects of the all-encompassing institution. (In this vein, see also Larner’s drywall-pulverizing machine, *Corner Basher*, 1988, a Lefebvrian critique of the production of space.) To borrow from Robert Smithson’s 1972 polemic against the “fraudulent categories” that govern the “wards and cells” in which art is imprisoned, Larner’s series at once embodies and analogizes the increasing confinement of culture. A petri dish and a gallery are contained, finite, and easily upset ecosystems, teeming with individual entities performing their duties in concert. Larner inoculates one system with the other, introducing volatility and ephemerality into a context—the gallery—that, per Smithson, neutralizes art’s internal charge, transforming works into “inanimate invalids.”





Larner, *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny (3 months)*, 1987, 1987, Cibachrome print, 15 1/2 x 19 1/2".

With these steely antecedents in mind, the romantic aspects of *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny* are all the more unexpected—its languishing flower, in particular, insisting on a kind of erotics of decay. A cut flower dies the moment the pruning shears separate it from the root, yet its death often goes unpronounced until its rotting has noticeably progressed. Tropical fuchsia cattleyas also conjure more specific associations, among them the prom corsages emblematic of adolescence. When else do you celebrate life by forcing your crush to wear a thing that's dying? To watch a cattleya wither is to catch a glimpse of nature in the midst of detumescence.

As the flower fades from fluorescent fuchsia to pale pink, sinus-infection green, and ultimately lifeless gray, the petri dish attains a funereal quality. With both the autumn of the culture's life and its impending doom visible in one glance, death in this instance is rather difficult to pin down. The work is defined by a temporal stutter or dislocation, always already dead and simultaneously in the process of dying—an everyday instance of death begetting rebirth. Decay is revealed by *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny* to be a flurry of life, as microbes begin to feast and water is released from the plant's flesh, pooling on the gleaming penny.

*Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny* was created the year ACT UP was founded, partly in response to the AIDS epidemic. Finding parallels in works like Félix Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills, which evoke the wasting body of the artist's lover, Larner's cultures speak to loss and allude to the action—scientific, governmental, or otherwise—that could have prevented such widespread devastation. If one were to attempt to illustrate a contemporary sense of solidarity against encroaching mortality, Gran Fury's iconic Benettonesque bus ad, *Kissing Doesn't Kill. Greed and Indifference Do.*, 1989, would make for a stupefying pairing with another work by Larner, *Every Artist Gave a Breath (Graz '88)*, 1988, created for a group show in which the exhibiting artists inoculated a single culture with their breath: The accumulated exsufflations turned it black.

This corporeal metonymy, where bacteria can represent the physical bodies of cultural and, by extension, political agents, is latent in all the "Cultures." Related concerns can be seen in works by a new generation of artists, including Ajay Kurian and Rachel Rose, who are interested in the fusion of natural order and its artificial manipulation in our everyday lives. Looking to Larner's precedent helps to clarify the stakes of such practices today. *Orchid, Buttermilk, Penny*, in its not-so-solitary confinement, manifests the hopeless entanglement of the biological and synthetic. Yet, as with bacterial infections, Larner's artworks challenge the bodies (organic or otherwise) to which they belong, threatening to one day overtake them. And even though the most wayward processes of natural propagation may inevitably be tamed, cured, they persist—their rogue potential always threatening revival or spread. Regeneration, after all, is only one exhibition away.

Beau Rutland is a writer and curator based in New York.