

Lily Dollner: On Bones, Futility, and the Fourth Dimension

Ludovica De Cesare



Michiel Schuurman, Poster for Kunstruimte Block C, performance by Lily Dollner *"The Artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort"*

The fourth dimension is a space that we, humans, have no way to perceive, and consequently no way to imagine. If we asked a two-dimensional shape living on a two-dimensional plane to try and imagine the third dimension, it would be impossible for it to fully be aware of it. It could understand length and width but height, the dimension that it is missing in its plane, would be impossible for it to imagine. It wouldn't even be able to try to imagine it, as it cannot understand its existence: it is a dimension in which he can't move in. This is very similar to our situation, as three-dimensional shapes living on a three-dimensional plane, the universe. We are able to move in three different directions, up, down and side to side: the fourth dimension and direction in which we could move in it, is impossible for us to imagine. However it is completely reasonable to a fourth dimensional observer...and to Lily Dollner.

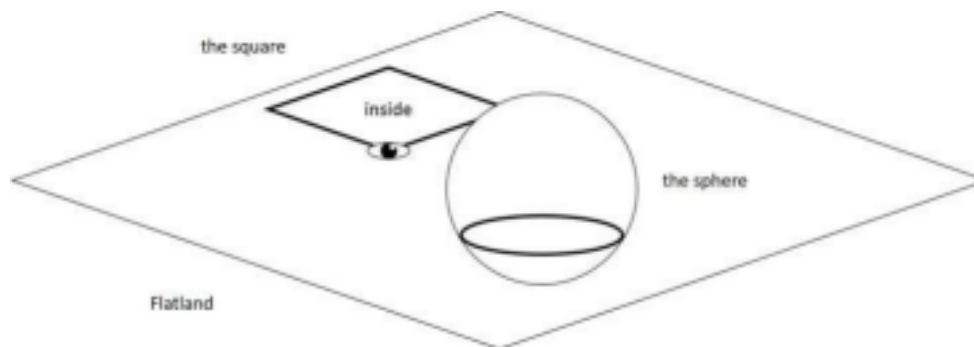
In her studio, surrounded by fragments of plaster and tools, Lily Dollner is carefully engraving one of the 525 bones that will inhabit her new sculpture. The manual repetition, the sheer patience of her labour, immediately sets the tone: this is not work made for efficiency, but for persistence, tension, and the strange beauty of futility. The piece will soon be presented at Block C's group exhibition "Fall: Five Fails".

The sculpture itself, a cube containing bones, recalls both anatomy and architecture. Yet for Dollner, it is more than a material construction—it is an attempt to suggest the existence of a fourth dimension.

"I was really inspired by the book *"Flatlands"*," she explains. "It's about creatures who live

on a two-dimensional plane, unaware of anything beyond it. When a sphere, a three dimensional figure, enters their world, they can only perceive it as circles growing and shrinking in size as it passes through. This story became an analogy for me. I wanted to make (for the Fall: Five Fails exhibition) a three-dimensional object that would allude to something more, a liveliness within it: the fourth dimension.”

The addition that she is going to bring to the exhibition is a cube, made out of cubes, imagined as an entity with bones and blood: meant to suggest indeed something more than an object. “I wanted it to be like the sphere in *Flatlands*: seemingly inanimate, but alive in a way that exceeds its form. That liveliness, to me, is a quality of the fourth dimension.”



Graph showing the different dimensions.
Source: Medium.com

Breaking Cubes, Finding Tension

Dollner’s work is deeply tied to repetition, destruction, and tension. On the 19th of September, for the opening of the exhibition, each cube will be broken open, by Lily herself, to reveal what lies inside. Yet often, the bones inside, also made out of fragile plaster, will shatter in the process.

“It takes a long time and a lot of energy to break these cubes,” she says. “There’s futility in it, because sometimes I fail to preserve the bone. But that failure creates tension. You don’t know what’s inside until it’s destroyed, yet you sense that something is there.” Destruction is then a fundamental element, making Lily Dollner able to activate, and free, the entity in those cubes.

This fragile suspense recalls her admiration for Bas Jan Ader, the Dutch artist whose practice balanced vulnerability and risk. “I think his work isn’t about falling or gravity itself, but that suspended moment before impact, before the box falls over him (Tea Party, 1972) for example—the tension of the inevitable. That’s what I want to capture: not just one kind of tension, but many coexisting.”



Bas Jan Ader, *Untitled (Tea Party)*, 1972, photo series, colour photographs.
Source: Elephant Magazine website

Vulnerability as a Tool

Vulnerability runs through Dollner's practice, often by using her own body, like in the video part of the project "The artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort" where she presented herself in front of the camera in the vulnerable position of cutting her long hair. She sees this not as confession but as a method.

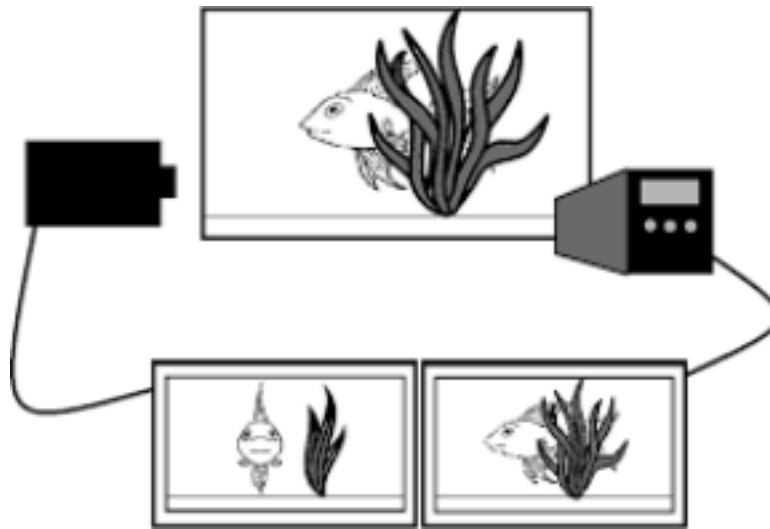


Lily Dollner, frame of the video part of the project *The artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort*, 2025. Source: Block C website

"For me, vulnerability is a tool to suggest the fourth dimension. You can't depict it directly, but you can gesture towards it through empathy, risk, or rawness. Bas Jan Ader cried in front of a camera or set himself in precarious situations, not just to show emotion, but to point to something beyond our grasp."

She links this feeling to physicist David Bohm's holographic theory of the universe: "It's like

a fish in a bowl, seen from multiple monitors, each giving a different angle but of the same reality. Bas Jan Ader's works create sympathy, you feel what he feels, even from a different perspective. I am trying to do the same. That's another way of reaching that extra dimension."



David Bohm's holographic theory of the universe, explanation graph of the fish in a bowl image.
Source: Spiderum

Futility, Failure, and Rebellion

The exhibition *Fall: Five Fails* asks artists from each venue that will take part in the project to reflect on failure. For Dollner, failure is not an end but a condition of process.

"I don't like the word 'failure' so much," she says. "When you expect something to fail, is it really failure? I see it more as miscommunication—when I fail to share what I intended. But failure can never only be negative. It proves you had a will, an intention. Every failure brings you closer to discovery."

Her practice embraces futility deliberately. In her earlier project "A Way", she engaged in long, fruitless travel as an artistic medium. "Doing something repetitive and useless is a rebellion against the capitalist obsession with productivity. A lot of people work very hard and are never rewarded for it. Nature doesn't work on that linear promise. By doing fruitless work, you train yourself not to accept the system as inevitable, to reconcile the meaning of labour against the fraught presumption that we live in a meritocracy"

For Dollner, "unproductiveness" is both resistance and method. "Because sometimes doing something the long way is how you get a lot more out of it. I think that if you spend a really long time doing something that could have been done quicker, there's more humanity in it. So in trying to be too useful, you actually get closer to uselessness. Then the theory is that perhaps by trying to be useless, you get closer to understanding what usefulness is."

Silly and Serious

Dollner finds kinship with Bas Jan Ader not only in themes of vulnerability and risk, but also in a refusal to separate seriousness from play. "He wasn't afraid of being silly, and neither am

I. I take silliness very seriously. Something can be silly and serious at once. I think the most serious things often are also silly.”

This fluidity extends to her use of mediums. For her, materials are secondary. “The medium I’m most in love with is an idea, a thought, or even a conspiracy theory. That’s the constant. The objects are just tools to communicate that research.”

Art as Research

Dollner resists seeing art as an end in itself. “I’m not in love with art as an idea. What matters to me is the research it allows. Historically, artists were scientists—people experimenting with how we perceive the world. I think art still has that potential.”

Asked about her artistic future, she laughs. “People keep inviting me to do projects, so I keep going. But for me, it’s not about the success or the objects: it’s about getting closer to this thing I can’t yet name. Recently it’s been the fourth dimension, before that it was futility. Every project crystallizes it a bit more.”

Her works suggest that failure is not an end but an opening, that futility is a method, and that vulnerability is a tool for grasping what cannot be grasped. In her cubes—fragile, futile, alive—one feels a tension that hints at something just beyond reach: a fourth dimension.

Performance

On the 19th of September 2025, I attended the performance that I anticipated in this article: for the opening of the collective project “Fall: Five Fails” Block C presented Lily Dollner, her fourth dimensional sculpture, and its destruction.

The sculpture was placed in the middle of the room, and on the wall behind the artist, the video of her cutting her hair, mentioned already in the article above, was presented. The sound of the video was overwhelming with her crying filling the room and creating a suggestive and emotional environment. Lily Dollner’s tears and laments were juxtaposed with the sound of the hammer and the chisel against the plaster of each cube. Hence the binary that she referred to during our conversation, one project doesn’t have to either be emotional or mechanical, but instead there can be a combination, the coexistence of both polars in one room, in one experience.



Lily Dollner, *The artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort*, performance, 2025, Block C, Groningen. Photo by: Marinus Augustijn

Lily Dollner during these mechanical, almost industrial movements was behind the sculpture, intent to extrapolate the bones out of each cube. It is common to have the stereotypical idea of the egocentric artist taking the space of the exhibition, especially when talking about performative art. However, that was not the case for Lily Dollner's performance. Although her face, her crying, and her presence filled the room, the real central focus remained the cube. It was as if the cube was brought -back perhaps- to life by Lily Dollner, and its activation, aliveness, was the true main character of Block C.

The tension, the same that she mentioned talking about the search for the fourth dimension in Bas Jan Ader's works, is the central element of the performance: we, in the audience, are waiting for her to succeed or fail in extrapolating each plaster bone, and we are hanging on every chisel strike.

Lily Dollner, in her latest project *The artist as consumer of extreme discomfort*, succeeds in representing what she so thoroughly researched on: an entity, a three-dimensional object in which, thanks to its activation, you can see the shadow of the fourth dimension, its aliveness.



Lily Dollner, *The artist as Consumer of Extreme Discomfort*, performance, 2025, Block C, Groningen.

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Ludovica De Cesare (2003, Rome) is an Art History student at the University of Groningen, where she is also part of the Honours College. Her research and writing often explore contemporary art, curatorial practices and the intersection between art, vulnerability and society.