

## Robert Gero (*Energeia*)

An essay by Buzz Spector

The first time I saw Robert Gero's columnar sculptures of metal and organic materials, I was struck by the utter simplicity with which they engaged a multitude of natural and cultural references. We were among the participants in a one-day art exhibit installed on the roof of a commercial building in Los Angeles. It was a blustery December Sunday, cold by California standards, with enough rain to keep artists and friends busy covering and uncovering the more environmentally sensitive objects. Over the course of the day I became aware of how the formal density and logic of Gero's work was connected to the identity of its constituent substances.

One of Gero's two modestly scaled, pillar-like forms had a shaft covered with kernels of corn; the other was coated with a greenish crystalline residue that a cautious lick revealed to be a mixture of salt and sulphur. Both were topped with blocks of crushed metal, of the type that might be found at a salvage yard. The artists had used an industrial compacter to form these shapes in copper and aluminum. My appreciation of the solidity and composure of these objects began with their form, but assumed a broader frame of reference when I considered the meanings of the stuff from which they were made.

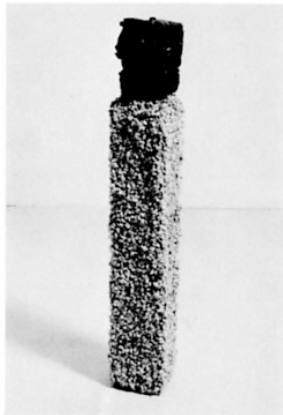
Recognizing the substantial composition of Gero's work is in fact the point of departure for a great range of reflections about the history of use of those substances, and how those usages—connected as well to their artistic representations—shaped the perception of those forms. That such disparate abstractions as fecundity, sexuality, abjection, or utopia find their way into the interpretation of Gero's work is a sign of its extraordinary conceptual richness.

The title of this, Gero's first one-person exhibit, is (*Energeia*), from the Greek term meaning "actuation of life." This Aristotelian concept can be understood as explaining the dynamics of any human practice. Gero's art proceeds from his interest in philosophy, focusing on the relationship between Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics and the practical rationalism of the Frankfurt School, particularly Jurgen Habermas. Gadamer's analyses of the relationship of theory and practice led him to clarify the notion of a practice giving life to form. Gero's endeavor is at least partially based on the concretization of this idea.

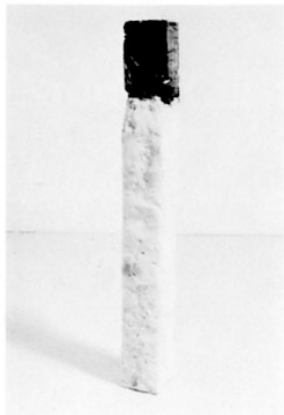
The formal organization of Gero's art can be seen in relation to such Modernist predecessors as Brancusi, and it shares in the cultural optimism of Modernism, while acknowledging the failure of its reductivising impulses. But the specific materiality of Gero's



Near right:  
Untitled 1988  
Copper, tar, corn  
column  
48x8x8 inches



Far right:  
Untitled 1988  
Aluminum, salt,  
sulfur column  
48x8x8 inches



work falls outside of Brancusi's material usages, which were enacted within a sculptural tradition of durability and monumentality. Gero makes a profound and subtle correlation between the vital potentiality of living substance and the substantial absolutism of chemical elements. The cubes of corn that are part of this installation symbolize—but also embody—growth, while the nearly pure copper bars on which they are mounted are also extremely chemically stable. Their elemental inertia opposes the vitality and changeability of the corn. This is the most obvious of a series of binary oppositions informing the work.

A kind of garden-like space is created by the clustering of individual sculptures, but this is a displaced, interior garden. The corn has been affixed to its cubic armatures so that, figuratively, it can never fall to earth. There is always a distance of between three and eight feet separating the corn from the floor, but this doesn't mean that the viability of the seed won't be demonstrated. Over the duration of the exhibit the work will be watered, so that the corn will sprout. This germination, instigated by the artist under the conditions of display, diverts the natural process of growth to a situation of aesthetic actuation. The perverse twist here is that this growth is ultimately futile. There is too little soil for too many seeds, so that the collective vital eruption will inevitably subside. It is this subordination of biological necessity to artistic will that allies Gero's practice to that of such artists as Wolfgang Laib or Meg Webster, concerned with analogising organic substances in terms of ideal social formations. Gero presents this ideal together with its binary opposite, in the process identifying the artist's will with the self-reflexive system of the Sadean libertine.

Gero has described the Habermasian utopia as an emancipation, through communicative actions, from the constraints that isolate and stratify groups of people. Art practice falls within this category of actions. The emancipations of the Sadean utopia, on the other hand, are achieved through collectivized sexual events that transgress social codes and conventions.

In this context, sex becomes a political, and hence, communicative activity. Gero's germinating corn is seed going forth. The ecstatic is here given sculptural form.

Gero uses a few very simple geometric structures in his sculpture; cubes, pyramids, spheres, and columns appear most often, with modest formal inflections in specific works. He chooses from among given shapes, invoking Wittgenstein's "ultimate simples" as a basis for such choice. But Gero often arranges his forms as if in defiance of gravity, upending or tilting them to challenge traditional sculptural conventions. The opposition of gravity and weightlessness is another recurring binary in his work.

Gero explores the dialectic between organization and materiality, expanding our sense of the potentials of art, and of the culture within which it is perceived. His project is fundamentally optimistic and grounded in a belief in the connection between the vitality of nature and the practice of art. Its energy comes from this actuation.

**Buzz Spector is an artist and writer who lives and works in Los Angeles.**



Left:  
Untitled 1989  
Aluminum, corn  
pyramid on cube  
60x24x18 inches