The genesis of this exhibition was a midnight flash following an invitation from an artist to curate a show in a fridge, in an office, in a contemporary art centre, which never happened. Since the flash, it has become something different, but a technological, institutional container remains nonetheless the limit within which this something tries to articulate itself.

The four artists in this exhibition have at least one thing in common when it comes to a rapport with the institution of heterosexuality, and I want to suggest that their works share a concern with the functioning of the technology that is language. The utterance of this common factor – uniting us under the banner of “Lit” – provides a vantage point (whether actual or abstract) from which to observe the assignation, importance and/or abuse of difference.

The work of naming things as common/same or individual/different is the work of power and thus must be understood. What cannot be understood, yet which must be accepted, is the existence of unconscious residues from what language forces on the subject. After all, this exhibition project started with a name it no longer bears: lesbian force.

“Perhaps a little awkward, but good ...
I’m thinking of this one afternoon ...
a powerful lesbian force from the 90s ...
a vintage Mercedes ...
a boot full of power tools ...
Thinking back …”

This is an excerpt from an email EFF designer Ella Sutherland wrote me in 2015. Having never lived in the same city at the same time, Sutherland and I have exchanged many an electronic mail, tending to intersperse work and personal information in the same epistolary space.

Sutherland’s throw away line about a “lesbian force” stuck in my mind. I try to imagine this person or this energy, and I find it at once amusing and ridiculous, empowering and tragic, for she is at once the joker and the butt of the jokes. There is not a place for her in this room, which does not at the same time preclude her from it. This is the power. A sort of negative force, in the sense that philosopher Catherine Malabou speaks of negative essence.

She is legible only to those who share her language, and hence the force can be both a threat and a salvation. The threat is exclusion from patriarchy; the salvation is that lives and lineages beyond patriarchy already exist. The threat is also that, better than anyone, the lesbian exposes the untenability of the ideology of heterosexism to which we are all subject, and thus she becomes a sort of void in the landscape of dominant meaning. And voids are horrific. As writer Amy Ireland says:

“The Phallus, the eye, and the ego are produced in concert through the exclusion of the cunt, the void, and the id. Via this casting of difference modelled on the reproductive (hetero-)sexual act alone—woman as passive, man as active—she is cut out of the legitimate circuit of exchange.”


So how to speak of something which is, in effect, not there? I took the word “lit” to stand in for all that is unspeakable, because, it shouldn’t be forgotten, at a certain point “lesbian force” is an unspeakable title. It contains some unspeakable shame, some oxymoronic latency that clashes with dominant language. Even if, in some rooms, “lesbian force” is a joke that we’re in on, in others it is a threat, a nasty one. The names we call things harbour immense power, which we most often cannot and do not control, try as we may.

Here is “Lit”.

Let it flick through your tongue behind your teeth and forward in your mouth, this little abbreviative single syllable.

Like in literature and litany, litmus and clitoris, slit, flit, littoral and liturgy, the L-I-T sound often makes for a tasty word. Beyond its sound, you can think of “alt-lit”, “chick-lit”, “lit up”, and the past participle of “light”.

And so it is lightly I want to tread when giving context to the four works presented in the online exhibition, Lit. Each artist’s practice is singular, but there is nonetheless a visible interest for each in how their being is legible or not to certain social codes or conventions. The way this manifests differs greatly for each artist. The common thread is the questioning of social and linguistic codes, present in both their artwork and ways of life, which permits one to present potentially conflicting information in one room, in this case, the room of EFFE. I take the liberty to offer some introductory words on each:

**Sydney artist and musician Del Lumanta’s Untitled (2017) video uses synth feed to create a pulsating abstract moving image charged with lines, pixels and gradients that recall an old analogue television with no signal. Rainbow-coloured and strangely silent, this six-minute sound wave-derived image is accompanied with pithy written anecdotes that describe verbal and gestural social interactions from the voice of an “I”. Employing the convention of subtitles, yet without any sound or voice-over, the short texts drily describe various banal encounters with heteronormativity that one presumes the artist herself has experienced. The combination of abstract visuals and succinct text dispassionately dismisses the urge to create visual or verbal representations of difference to be assimilated for the satisfaction of dominant culture. Lumanta refrains from illustration and does not analogise her experiences to aid viewers’ comprehension of the message. The dryness of the delivery is countered only by the abstract rainbow colour-fields (the artist insists this reference to gay iconography was a coincidence, an unpredictable result of the synth-to-image procedure), which together verge on tongue-in-cheek camp but ultimately remain mute. The violence of what is transmitted is implicit, and hence the terse comic timing of the subtitles must be understood as a technique of obfuscation at the same time as it exposes the remainders of that same violence.**

**Athena Thebus’ text Doggy (2017) comprises a series of text fragments outlining experiences with lovers, as well as thoughts on death, shame, her mother. Scattered with lyrics and titles from the songs of Australian pop star Kylie Minogue, the short texts are assembled to create a rhythmic yet staccato impression of the artist’s philosophy of “being a dog”. Never shying away from popular references – what she might affectionately label “capitalism’s excess” – Thebus’ practice explicitly works to produce and promote queer culture and life and thus rethink rapport of family and love. The reflections in Doggy speak frankly of desires and failings, moments of lust, and traces of resentment or mourning. Thebus’ desire to be a dog, and her consistent reference to canine being, uncover the tension between wanting animal encounters (no shame) and yet having to contend with one’s inevitable humanity: being divided by language (shame). Responding to this question materially, Thebus’ work makes consistent reference to**
piss. She writes: “When I think of anchoring myself, being spiritually and physically steady / I feel a thick stream of piss / Slinking down from my body like heavy lengths of chain / The draining sensation that’s also relieving”. To let yourself go, to make your piss public, to expose shame as that which is constitutive of your essence, this is the language that Thebus seeks to work with and through, decentring dominant heterosexuality through queer becoming.

On first glance, Frances Sharp’s pencil drawings emanate teenage angst, yet this wicked mood undermines the complexity and obsessional nature of the works. Here reproduced are just three from a vast array of drawings produced in Sharp’s studio in Melbourne, the basis of which is often geometrical non-functional or semi-functional architectural forms and furnishings, in relation to which human, non-human and ex-human characters exist in a non-gravitational and non-proportional field. Sharp’s drawings make recurrent, somewhat ironic and often tautological references to death (as phenomenon and symbol). In Glory Mask [portrait] (2016) an imagined architectural space, housing an alien with a human skull, forms the shape of a skull itself. In Glory Mask [landscape] (2016), a cat sits on the face of a skeleton lying on a wooden floor. The cat winks at the viewer as if to say: “who’s the pussy now?” In the larger work Hot Piss and the Endless Sea (snake pit) (2016), a sea of eyeballs rain down on the tomb of a skeleton Vitruvius (another reference to architecture) surrounded by snakes eating one another (a reference to western medicine?). Smiling meteors shower fire from above, and a bleeding woman floats among double helices. If this is the structure of language (life, mortality, morality) into which we have been born, Sharp’s art works to upend it. In this macabre world, it is not that the signs and symbols we recognise are made illegible, but that they are reordered to form a new realism.

Elena Betros’ video operates within the confining domestic interior of one room in a middle-class home. The widest frame represents a sitting room, a space that should offer comfort but here appears token, a demo, even a stage set. Based on imaginative character-studies of two women in Simone de Beauvoir’s The Mandarins (1954), the voice-over describes the ways two females occupy “the room”. Yet, as the video continues we realise the descriptions evade any narrative sense, the script itself is a (mis-)representation. By confusing the characters and continually shifting focus, Betros suspends our capacity to judge, literally preventing stability. During long, hand-held frames of the room, the exposure of the image is tampered with and the accompanying extreme close-ups lead us to lose perspective of our location in space. One’s “view” of any situation is always subject to the limits of the lens. With no visual representation of the women, we rely on the artist’s enigmatic descriptions, implying that language is the institution that literally frames us as subjects. The space of Is she talking to herself most of the time? Often. Often? (2016) is a psychological one as much as an actual habitation. Through the theatricalisation and distortion of both the domestic convention of the sitting room and de Beauvoir’s literary masterpiece, we begin to see the ways that language – and images – can only ever generate gaps through which we attempt to fill in our desires.

So, how to name things, how to categorise things, how to talk about things and justify their being put together in an art exhibition? How to do this when description always falls short of actual experience? How to talk about the work of these four artists, how to introduce an exhibition, when my real subject is language?

As Ariel Goldberg writes in their recent book The Estrangement Principle (2016):

“Labeling art and writing ‘queer’ affirms the power of those who are consistently silenced. The decision not to label art
Whether to label or not is not my main concern, what is important is how the subject requiring the label can be both named and not named at the same time, can be both in the realm of language and outside it, can be the joker and the butt of the joke, and can thus subvert a realm of language that we have become all too accustomed to.

To conclude with Malabou, in her lecture “Post-Gender Theory and the Feminine” (2014):

“Woman will be my subject, woman will not have been my subject, woman negates this negation itself.”

An older lesbian artist farewells me as I leave her opening in Melbourne in 2015, laughing: “may the force be with you.”

–Eleanor Ivory Weber, September 2017


4 Malabou.

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