

EN

Lesbian Legacies #3:

„The Butch is Here To Stay“

Ella C Bernhard, Dana DeGulio, Risk Hazekamp, Otilie Roederstein, Toni Schmale, Anne Schmidt

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Scherben Berlin

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In 1998, Jack Halberstam's "Female Masculinity" appeared, a groundbreaking work of queer theory. It traces the history of female masculinities, from pre-lesbian practices of the nineteenth century to contemporary drag king performances. Despised by mainstream society and both marginalized and desired within queer communities, the figure of the "masculine woman" is one of the most powerful markers of queer women's desire. In the essay "No Matter What's Gendertrending, the Butch is Here To Stay" (2018), Halberstam updates these reflections with a hymn-like homage: "Butch is always a misnomer; masculine but not male, female but not feminine, the term serves as a placeholder for the unassimilable, for that which remains indefinable or unspeakable within the many identifications that we make and that we claim."

The historical point of departure and reference for the exhibition are the self-portraits of Otilie W. Roederstein (1859–1937). Roederstein was a recognized, economically successful artist who was deeply networked within the contemporary art world, and yet — like so many of her female colleagues — was "forgotten." More precisely: her creativity, her work, her reputation fell victim to the misogyny that persists in the art system even today; that is, they were devalued and dismissed by sexist art historians, collectors, and gallerists. Roederstein is now being rediscovered, but the conspicuous emphasis on "masculine elements" that marks both her self-portraits and her presence in real life is, in contemporary reception, read merely as an attempt to earn respect as a woman artist in a male-dominated art world. Thus she is consistently "misnamed," "misgendered," and "de-queered."

Juxtaposed with Roederstein's works, we present contemporary positions that engage in formally idiosyncratic and thematically subtle ways with the artistic-aesthetic and socio-cultural defiance of female masculinity/ies. These works respond to their "non-assimilability" and to the idea strongly articulated by Halberstam that the figure of the Butch stands for everything "that cannot be absorbed into systems of signification, legitimation, legibility, recognition and legality." (Halberstam).

Dana DeGiulio's work "Gladiator" (2025) adapts a ceramic tile floor produced in 1892 by Filippo Palizzi in the Palazzo Florio in Palermo, a wedding gift from Ignazio Florio to Donna Franca Florio. The artist paints, in acrylic on PVC tiles, a version closely resembling the original, which is laid out and affixed to the floor of the gallery in two locations—by the entrance to Leipziger Straße and by the door to the restrooms. The changes that emerge as visitors step onto and walk across the tiles become an integral part of the work. In her practice, Dana DeGiulio positions materiality against representation. In the context of her work, genre means more than the typologies of traditional art theory, which, for example, divides painting into landscape, portrait, or still life. Rather, genre is in a broader sense a structuring factor and "site": a chosen playing field in which conventions and norms can be enacted and subverted. The cliché—exemplified in "Gladiator" by the floral motif—is used to shift, through an exaggerated gesture, the norm contained within the cliché across social classes and generations.

Ella C. Bernhard works with found, everyday, and industrially used objects and materials—things of universal familiarity—that, while connecting to social conditions, become something else through their transformation. The tires used in the exhibited installations, for example, remain recognizable as such, but simultaneously open up awareness for what else they might be. This transformation invites us to reconsider the familiar—it allows things to be both themselves and something different, beyond the sayable. At the same time, the objects and materials she uses are often parts of large artificial structures on which our society depends, yet which rarely stand out for their size.

Both Bernard's and DeGiulio's works transcend their material presence in space. Bernard's tire and tension band installations, as well as DeGiulio's tiles, occupy an ambiguous, uninhabited spatial state and prompt us to imagine what might be—what may exist beyond what is named.

Risk Hazekamp's "The Giant Series" (they/them) may at first seem a "simple" reference to the theme, but on closer inspection it becomes more complex: the work refers to the poster for the film "Giant" (1956). It was James Dean's final film before his death in a car accident in 1955 at just 24. His earlier film, "Rebel Without a Cause" (1955), which entered film history as an authentic portrait of the "Silent Generation," had already made him an idol for youth in the (Western) world. In the "Giant Series," Hazekamp performs James Dean's role in the film. Dean himself is also copying: as a youth, he learned his novel and fascinating, non-heteronormative masculinity—which made him a queer icon—from the butch lesbians of the queer underground.

Hazekamp has been working on the series since 2001, producing a new version every eight years. The latest, from 2025, is being presented in this exhibition for the first time. The sequential work not only documents the changes to Hazekamp's body, the effects of time, but also recalls the relevance of the principle of repetition for how we understand gender. The impression that gender is "natural" arises from the continual repetition of the practices that generate it. There is, however, a certain potential for error inherent in repetition, as each new enactment is never completely identical to those that came before. These are, rather, variations with leeway for deviation and resistance.

Toni Schmale's video work "wo die angst ist geht es lang" (2006) is a "reproduction" of a performance of the same name the previous year, during which Schmale, over seven consecutive days, punched out an 80-kg punching bag filled with quartz sand and suspended from a steel frame, by cutting a hole in the bottom so that the sand would slowly pour out.

The video work returns to the beginning of Toni Schmale's artistic development. Central to her practice are massive sculptures of steel and concrete that oscillate between fitness machines and BDSM furniture, often playing with clear sexual connotations. Schmale works with reliably standardized steel parts, which she forces or coaxes—through considerable physical effort and technical know-how—out of form and thus out of the norm. With this, Toni Schmale develops a resistant, as ironic as it is determined, language for exploring the entanglements of body, material, and power within a binary, heterosexist gender order. The bodily engagement and struggle with material, still visibly an action in the video, becomes latent in the objects: what is visible are the results of prior, laborious and physically demanding processes of working.

"Queerness means resistance to me," says Anne Schmidt. "I think that if, as a queer person, I have sex three times with anyone, the other person will also automatically become queer." Her novel "Me after Two Anal Orgasms" is an autofictional transcript of a short, intense love affair between the protagonist and Martin—the epitome of a totally heteronormative "dude"—marked by "embarrassing honesty." The novel is part of her diploma project, to which she herself wrote a review describing it as "trash fiction"—that is, as pulp, dime, or chapbook literature and as a genre of escapism in which one can immerse in another world where conflicts are simplified, emotions are heightened, and wishes are directly fulfilled.

Illustrated with deliberately "bad drawings," Schmidt writes her own pulp novel, surrendering to the "illusion, while writing, of never having to deal with myself again, with my precarity as an artist, my own queer identity struggle, ego dystonia, the mechanisms of the art world, and global tipping points." Literary trash becomes an artistic strategy for exploring how "explicit sexual scripts can be written and images of female bodies and queer sexuality produced without reproducing hegemonic power structures."

The exhibition is part of the three-part series "Lesbian Legacies," which, with succinct strokes, sketches outlines of the cultural legacy of lesbian artists from the early 20th-century modernism to the present. The project is funded by the Hauptstadtkulturfonds and curated by Tarik Kentouche and Lorenz Liebig of Kunstraum Scherben, as well as Birgit Bosold.

Text: Birgit Bosold & Tarik Kentouche

**Ella C Bernard** graduated from the Städelschule in 2022 after studying biochemistry. Her practice encompasses sculpture, installation, moving image, and text. She works primarily with found and used materials, which she integrates into her installations or shapes into sculptures. She is interested in how these objects reveal time and the relationship to the body. The materials Bernard uses always retain their aesthetic independence. She describes her practice as a conversation, a dance—sometimes even a struggle with the material. Her sculptural work operates largely on a non-visual level. Bernard has had solo exhibitions at the Garage Gallery, Prague; the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris; the Stadium Gallery and Cave 3000, Berlin; Rue de Pompe, Paris; and the Shore Gallery, Athens. She is currently completing her MFA at Bard College, N.Y.

**Dana DeGiulio** (\*1978, Chicago) lives and works in Brooklyn. She studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (MFA 2007). In her practice, which spans painting, drawing, video, installation, writing, and teaching, she explores materiality beyond traditional representation and questions the aims of artistic means themselves. She conducts an iterative perceptual painting practice and is interested in genre as a site to play out the dialectic of defiance and allegiance, in repetition as devotion, habit, and estrangement, in attention as volatile, volitional, and market rate, and in looking away as a form of care. DeGiulio has held numerous solo and two-person exhibitions, including at the California Museum of Photography (Riverside, CA), Carrie Secrist Gallery (Chicago), and PPOW Gallery (New York). She is Professor of Visual Arts at Columbia University School of the Arts, New York.

**Risk Hazekamp** (\*1972, The Hague) lives and works in The Hague. Risk (they/them) studied at the Willem de Kooning Academie in Rotterdam and the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, and has been teaching at the St. Joost School of Art & Design since 2015. Their work centers on the relationship between body and image. Through personal activism, decolonial practices, and analogue photography, Risk develops visual strategies that question existing systems. As a member of the Biobased Art and Design research group, Risk recently completed a PhD with the project *Unlearning Photography: Listening to Cyanobacteria* at Sint Lucas School of Arts, Antwerp.

**Anne Schmidt** (\*1990, near Chemnitz) is a multimedia artist and autofictional writer based in Vienna. She studied social and criminological sciences as well as sculpture. Her work examines contemporary ideologies and social narratives from a personal perspective, confronting mechanisms of discipline and identity attribution. Humor plays a central role in her critical approach. Schmidt's works have been shown at the Museum Moderner Kunst Wien (mumok), Belvedere 21, and Kunsthalle Wien. She is currently a fellow in the mentoring program of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

**Toni Schmale** (\*1980, Hamburg) studied Media Art in Leipzig and Performance and Sculpture with Monica Bonvicini in Vienna. Her practice includes drawing, photography, video, performance, and installation, addressing structures of power and gender relations. Her sculptures, often made of concrete or steel, resemble machines that relate to the human body. Schmale's works have been shown internationally, including at the Salzburger Kunstverein, Wiener Secession, Moscow International Biennale for Young Art, and Kyiv Biennale.

**Otilie Wilhelmine Roederstein** (1859–1937) lived and worked in Frankfurt and Hofheim am Taunus. She was a renowned and successful portrait painter of her time. In 2019, the Städel Museum received an extensive donation from her estate, which has since been the subject of scholarly research, offering deep insight into the life and work of this exceptional artist of the turn of the century. Most recently, her work was presented in monographic exhibitions at Kunsthaus Zürich and the Städel Museum, Frankfurt.