The Lowest Relief
MARIA FLAWIA LITWIN
Curated by Katherine Dennis
This publication is produced in conjunction with the exhibition
THE LOWEST RELIEF | MARIA FLAWIA LITWIN
curated by Katherine Dennis
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It is with great pleasure that TYPOLOGY opens its third year of public programming with The Lowest Relief | Maria Flawia Litwin. Curated by Katherine Dennis, this wonderful exhibition represents the continuing fulfillment of a key part of our mandate: to provide curators and artists with opportunities to produce exhibitions and publications within a critical and professional framework. In developing and mounting this exhibition, Dennis and Litwin have embraced this opportunity wholeheartedly, co-conspiring to present Litwin’s magical and intricate paper cut works in a delightfully engaging and experimental light. Working with the shape of the space, including a subtle yet playful exploration into the effects of changing light on the exhibition, Litwin introduces elements of site- and time-specificity to her works on paper (a natural impulse for this multidisciplinary artist, whose work in video often traces long arcs in time and place). Thus adding further dimension to both the physical cuts and the storied accounts they imply or represent in this multilayered work, the exhibition yields new discoveries for the attentive viewer with each moment spent in its orbit. Building on Katherine Dennis’ illuminating curatorial essay and Caoimhe Morgan-Feir’s probing interview, successive viewings promise yet more to gaze upon, wonder about, and be surprised by.

On this occasion we would also like to extend a warm “welcome home” to Katherine Dennis, who has brought to fruition a labour of love all the way from her new home of Vancouver. This heartfelt project is itself the storied celebration of two well-traveled friends who met on the road years ago, and whose friendship continues to bridge great distances in both art and life.

SHANI K PARSONS
TORONTO 2015
IN THE FACE OF ABSURDITY “ONE MUST IMAGINE SISYPHUS HAPPY.”¹ Condemned by the gods, the tragic hero is compelled to find contentment in the pointless repetition of pushing a boulder to the summit of a mountain, whereupon it is doomed to fall back of its own weight. The futile act itself gives life meaning.

Toronto-based artist Maria Flawia Litwin shares French philosopher Albert Camus’ existential worldview articulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Through his interpretation of this Greek tale Camus explains how “the workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd.”² Yet, in knowing and accepting that the toil of life is nothing but “futile and hopeless labour” one becomes the “master of his days.”³ Litwin brings her own purposeless yet significant moments to the fore in *The Lowest Relief*, an exhibition of new works on paper. Senseless as any task may be—pushing the boulder, cutting the paper, waking for work, washing the dishes—within these acts exist contentment and worth.

Inspired by feminist theory and existential thinking—especially that of Simone de Beauvoir, who determined her destiny through writing and an unconventional lifestyle—Litwin allows her daily toil to become one of self-determination and choice. Her art stems from the personal recognition of life’s inevitable conclusion—death—while still finding meaning and intention in all the moments, large and small, which build to this end.
Maria Flawia Litwin was born in Wrocław (also known as Breslau in German and Vratislav in Czech), a city that throughout its history has been part of Poland, Hungary, the Austrian Empire, Prussia, and Germany. Growing up in Poland and Australia, Litwin was immersed in communism and the effects of a post-World War II Eastern Europe. Her exposure to the capitalist and consumerist ideologies of the West clashed and intermingled with her view of the changing political landscape of Poland. She also lived in Paris, France and travelled extensively throughout Europe, in the Baltic States and India, finally settling in Canada 18 years ago. This intersection of cultural and political forces did much to shape her identity and in turn her nomadic life and her immigrant identity permeates her artwork.

Ideas of landscape and a strong sense of place are central to Litwin’s oeuvre. While rarely the primary subject of her often narrative practice, the physical location or implied settings are crucial to the conceptual framework of her art. In this body of work many images reference significant places from the artist’s life. Well-travelled viewers might recognize Alberta’s Rocky Mountains, the Parisian skyline or the Australian East Coast. In *Nulliparous* the cold apartment block evokes the dreary Communist neighbourhood of her childhood. The ominous weight of the grays—in the sky, stones, building, and birds—forebode nefarious dealings. In describing this series, the artist draws insight from a quotation by writer Kazuo Kamimura (loosely translated by Litwin): “Those things which mark a person the most, aren’t so much past experiences, but the landscapes in which one has lived.” This emphasis on place complicates the reading of her work.

2. Ibid., 121.
3. Ibid., 123.
4. Maria Flawia Litwin: Just realized I travelled to all but one continent. We spent time in 2003 in Argentina and Chile.
Interviewing Maria Flawia Litwin is surprisingly difficult. For each question I posed, she had three answers (each brilliant, each different). She constantly returns to past positions, revising and reworking them. While Litwin’s inquisitive nature makes her an unwieldy subject, it also makes her an ideal artist. Her work has countless offshoots, indulging unlikely forms of craft, unwieldy theory and obscure film sources, but it’s always marked by a level of questioning: why structures are as they are, how they have changed, whether or not they should be trusted. Litwin embarks on a process of sense-making, but doesn’t attempt to simplify her subjects. She makes sense of things by making them strange again.

CAIOMHE MORGAN-FEIR: Although your work with wycinanki marks something of a shift in medium, it pulls on references that you have been drawn to for a while. Take Kazuo Kamimura’s suggestion that a person is marked as much by the landscapes in which they have lived as their past experiences. When did you come across that quote?

MARIA FLAWIA LITWIN: I was watching a French movie called L’amour est un crime parfait, and the main character is a literature professor and he quotes it. There are other references in the show: one of the titles is a direct quote from Simone de Beauvoir’s Mémoires d’une jeune fille rangée, where she talks about becoming her proper cause, her purpose (which is writing). I had the same feeling during a residency at the Banff Centre.

The realization was that your purpose in life was to be an artist? You’ve done a number of residencies in Banff, but that sounds particularly formative. When was it?
ABOUT THE ARTIST
Maria Flavia Litwin grew up in Poland and Australia, straddling the Iron Curtain. She has spent the last 18 years living and working in Toronto. Encounters with communist and consumer ideologies within social and educational structures have made Litwin sensitive to the fluid and shifting nature of belief systems. She is particularly concerned with the way changes in ideology manifest themselves in her figurative and literal environment. Marxism, feminism and humour have greatly impacted her art production. Although trained as a sculptor, Litwin’s work is not medium specific and takes the form of textiles, data collecting, performance, acting, video, photography, and fiction writing. Litwin holds a BFA from the Ontario College of Art & Design and a Master’s degree from York University in Toronto.

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ABOUT THE CURATOR
Katherine Dennis, a Vancouver-based curator and researcher, has worked with a range of institutions, from historic houses to public museums and independent galleries. Her practice bridges disciplines including exhibition making, public programming and visitor studies, and places such as British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario. Currently, Dennis is a Research Associate at Pivotal Research Inc. and Adult Public Programs Coordinator at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

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ABOUT TYPOLOGY

Providing opportunities for curators and participating artists to mount fully realized exhibitions within a critical framework, TYPOLOGY is a not-for-profit initiative which seeks to build curatorial community at the local, national, and international levels. Through a wide-ranging annual program of exhibitions supported by the production of original publications, editions, and related events, TYPOLOGY is an open platform for diverse curatorial practices and perspectives, and a forum for the exchange of ideas on exhibition-making as a way to engage and inform audiences from all walks of life.

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