

## EXTRA TERRESTRIAL <sup>1</sup>

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To construct her installation *Test Tubes*, Elida Tessler has drawn from a book by the Brazilian theorist Donaldo Schüler (*O homem que não sabia jogar*, translated as 'The man who doesn't know how to play.'). The artist has extracted words beginning with an 'e' or 't' and placed them in approximately 2,500 test tubes distributed evenly around the gallery. The 'e' words are in red and the 't' words in blue.

On first visit, we are confronted by an alchemic kind of hermeneutics. The gallery is transformed into a metaphysical laboratory, as though the scene of an experiment conducted by alien beings attempting to break the code of human intelligence. Like a literary version of the human genome project, Tessler extracts, sorts and mixes words. But as to what meaning?

For an Australia audience, *Test Tubes* is an opportunity to encounter a foreign knowledge. Certainly, 'ET' suggests an alien consciousness at work. We are confronted with a particularly literal reading of text, where words are aligned on a purely formal basis. However, what's new to us is actually a well-established methodology for Tessler. Her previous installations have included such arrangements as verbs in a 360 degree landscape outlook and a text stretched on horizon across a real beach.

So where is she coming from?

Tessler's work is the start of a journey for Melbourne audiences. The journey includes the Kabala, the school of Jewish mysticism that ascribed creative powers to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. A link between Kabala and contemporary art is then found in the work of French author Georges Perec, who once composed an entire novel, *La Disparition* (1969), without using the letter 'e'. Like Tessler, this Oulipo school of experimental fiction uses formal constraints to express something that cannot be spoken directly.

And somewhere along the way, we pass through the largest Catholic country in the world, Brazil. Arguably the most self-confident of southern cultures, Brazil claims to have invented its own kind of modernism. One of its idiomatic cultural practices, *anthropophagia*, advocates the cannibalising of western culture. Tessler's works take language literally, rendering the symbolic realm into our embodied experience.

Perhaps *Test Tubes* also says something closer to home. Can we see ourselves as these containers? Hosts to mystery? Vessels of words foreign to our understanding?

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<sup>1</sup> Texto publicado no folder da exposição TEST TUBES<>TUBOS DE ENSAIO – RMIT GALLERY – RMIT University – Melbourne – Austrália - 2006