

Sightings:
Anne Le Troter
Nasher Sculpture Center



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The Four Fs: Family, Finance, Faith, and Friends

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Born in Saint-Étienne, France in 1985, Anne Le Troter lives and works in Paris. Her body of work explores the rhythms and physicality of language through sound: “I arrange ‘language blocks’ one after the other, reworking them, using the constraints of each phrase: duration, tone, and breathing.”¹ Le Troter’s process begins with spoken language: she collects found recordings—a telemarketer’s script or medical dictation, for example—that she then edits and reconstructs in a linguistic montage, often combining a multitude of voices speaking in unison or overlapping one another with results that are hypnotic and at times illogical, bordering on the absurd. The artist then builds installations for her audio works that function as spaces to listen. These installations often include banal furniture evocative of transitional places—waiting rooms or office cubicles—and fall somewhere between décor and set design, as Le Troter describes: “I am trying to set up environments that are as stable as possible, to let the words develop. I’m also trying to make a place for the spectator.”²

Le Troter describes herself as a writer first, taking as inspiration the work of contemporary French poets Christophe Tarkos and Nathalie Quintane. “I do not know if I’m a poet or even if I can be part of the landscape of poetry, but it’s the medium from which I learn the most,” she says.³ Among Le Troter’s earliest published writings is *L’encyclopédie de la matière* (The encyclopedia of matter), for which the artist gives an account of her working process and interactions with the materials of sculpture.⁴ The choppy and repetitive text reads as an improvised monologue or a breathless discourse on the stages of a developing thought. The text for *L’encyclopédie de la matière* is based on audio recordings the artist made while describing out loud the actions she was carrying out, as well as the thoughts that arose as she did so. While studying sculpture at the School of Art and Design in St.-Étienne, Le Troter began experimenting with a set of audio recorders. Slowly, the written and spoken word began to take precedence over objects to eventually become Le Troter’s primary medium: “By using that tool [audio recorders], I became aware of editing, which in turn enabled me to produce a form of acoustic sculpture based on my own voice.”⁵ Thus formed the basis of Le Troter’s interest in the materiality of language.



LEFT AND BELOW:
Exhibition view: Anne Le Troter,
Liste à puces, 2017, Palais de Tokyo,
Paris, February 3 – May 8, 2017.
Photo: Aurélien Mole.



Le Troter's work has been significantly influenced by Fluxus artist Robert Filliou (1926–1987), particularly his poem/performance "l'austrisme" (1962), in which four different characters named for the first four letters of the alphabet instruct the audience: "Whatever you're thinking, think something else; whatever you're doing, do something else; Whoever you are, be somebody else."⁶ Filliou described the origin of "l'austrisme" as:

...an action poem. It illustrates the possibility of making a performance out of one's ideas, instead of turning them, through the writing of manifestoes, into theories. Thus, as in any performance, possibilities of spontaneous improvisations, even contradictions, remain. Clearly it is teaching and learning as performing arts.⁷

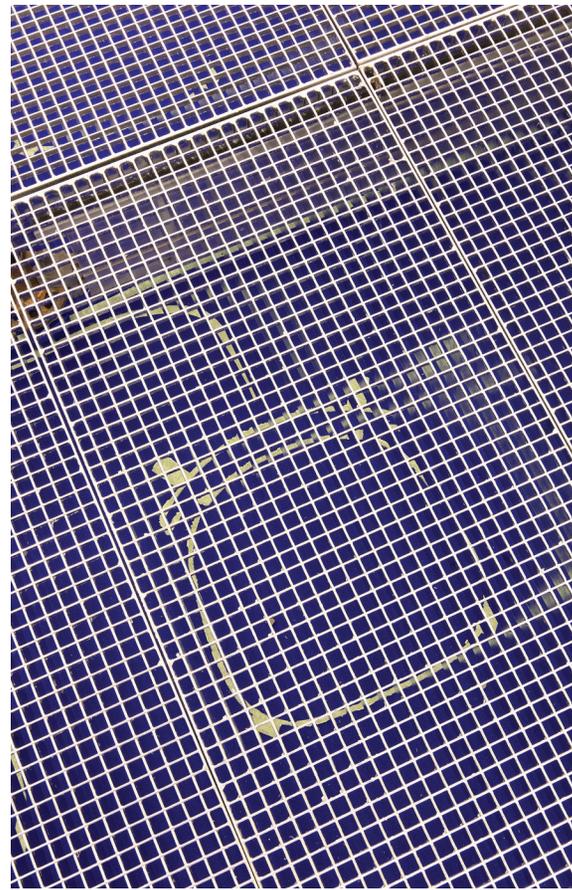
With Filliou's work in mind, Le Troter created one of her earliest sound pieces, *Fifi, Riri, Loulou* (2011), which comprises a series of recorded improvisations in which she edited out all the silences between the spoken words, creating a kind of stream of consciousness on speed.⁸ The title refers to the French names for the Disney cartoon characters, Huey, Dewey, and Louie Duck—nephews to Donald Duck—but Le Troter rearranged the usual order of the names (Riri, Fifi, and Lou Lou) to emphasize her reference to Filliou, bringing the title of the sound piece phonetically closer to his name. More recently, Le Troter performed *Courte biographie* (Short biography) in 2017 at the invitation of the Médiathèque, Fonds d'art contemporain de la Ville de Genève (FMAC) on the occasion of FMAC's celebration of Filliou's *The Whispered History of Art*—an oral lecture that blurs the boundaries distinguishing lecture, poetry, and performance. In it, the Fluxus artist describes the origins of art over the course of a calendar year, beginning each stanza with the 17th day of the month: "It all started the 17th of January, one million years ago. A man took a dry sponge and dropped it into a bucket full of water. Who that man was is not important. He's dead. But art is alive."⁹ During her performance, Le Troter focused on the number 17 and the corresponding events she had recorded in old day planners, playing on the repetitive nature of Filliou's piece and the standardized layout of time as formatted in the datebooks: "In 2017, the Moleskin days begin at 8 a.m. and end at 8 p.m. / Unlike Moleskin's schedule, my day has started at 9 a.m. Full sun in Norway."¹⁰ Her performance drew connections between the various mundane actions Filliou describes as art in his seminal work and Le Troter's own actions on the 17th day of the month in any given day planner.



ABOVE:
Exhibition view: Anne Le Troter, *Les Mitoyennes* (The commons), 2015, La BF15, Lyon, France, September 11 – November 7, 2015. Photo: Jules Roeser.

After several years of making works based on her own writings with her own voice, Le Troter began recording the voices of others and eventually turned to found language as an additional source.¹¹ Starting in 2015, she began a series of sound sculptures and installations around the standardized language of telemarketers, culminating in her piece for the exhibition *Rendez-Vous* as part of the 2017 Lyon Biennial. Titled *Les silences après une question* (The silences after a question),¹² Le Troter recorded the voices of a group of telemarketers based in Lyon, with whom she collaborated for the three-part series. In the recordings, the telemarketers pose questions derived from their standard scripts, but provide no answers—just as they would during a standard telephone solicitation. The resulting audio work involves the listener in a sound community with multiple identities, as the voices overlap one another with melodic and harmonious results. Le Troter debuted the series at the 2015 Lyon Biennial with *Les mitoyennes* (The commons)¹³ and presented the second act, titled *Liste à puces* (Bullethead list), in 2017 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.¹⁴ For this version, Le Troter collaborated with a French polling company to gain access to archived recordings of past political polls conducted via telephone, combining these sound clips with recordings she conducted with her telemarketing pollsters. Situated in the art center's former theater, Le Troter transformed the space into a call center, using blue carpet evocative of architectural blueprints, with white outlines on the floor denoting the profiles of the different telemarketers whose voices filled the gallery. *Liste à puces* echoed contemporary political events in the runup to the 2017 French presidential election and the role of opinion pollsters, taking a familiar form—the political survey—and distorting the questions' structure through editing and montage.

Between creating works related to her fascination with the language of telemarketers, Le Troter made two sound pieces that exemplify her interest in the coded language of specific trades or professions. For *De l'interprétariat* (Interpreting) (2016)¹⁵, Le Troter edited together the remains of archived tapes of medical dictation from a dental radiology center that had been used and reused repeatedly. Le Troter took what was left—a mixture of medical terminology and linguistic markers (i.e., punctuation: "Period, end of sentence.")—to create a sound work inspired by Dadaist Tristan Tzara's belief that "thought is made in the mouth."¹⁶ The artist's entry for the 61st Salon de Montrouge explored the world of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR)—a physical sensation characterized by tingling of the skin and positive emotions that is typically triggered by such sounds as whispered voices, crinkling wrappers, even the tapping of fingertips on skin.¹⁷ For this sound work, titled *L'appétence*, (desire) ASMR artists whisper their responses to Le Troter's unrecorded prompts. In part one, ASMR artists describe themselves physically (eye



LEFT AND BELOW:
Anne Le Troter, *Les silences après une question*,
2017, Lyon Biennial, Lyon, France, September 20 –
November 16, 2017. Photo: Blaise Adilon.





Installation view: Anne Le Troter, *De l'interprétariat*, 2016, Arnaud Dechin Galerie, Paris, France, September 14 – October 14, 2016.
Photo: Romain Darnaud.

color, length of hair, body build, etc.); they then transition to describing the difference between murmuring and whispering; and finally conclude the work by describing the sound of their voice as a whisper. Emanating from beneath plastic seating reminiscent of waiting rooms or transit stops, the resulting experience highlighted the discrepancy between form and content: the ASMR artists' whispering technique suggested the viewer had stumbled upon something illicit or clandestine, while their language begins as rote or somewhat boring, before progressing into a meta discourse on ASMR and whispering.

For the Nasher commission, Le Troter has developed a sound piece that comprises hundreds of audio samples she collected from a US-based cryobank, a business that gathers and stores human sperm from donors for use by women who need donor-provided sperm to achieve pregnancy. Visitors to such websites can view donor profiles whose format resembles those for online dating sites, complete with physical descriptions (height, weight, hair, and eye color), education level, occupation, age range, images of the donors as children and adults, and—to aid visually-challenged clients with their search—audio interviews with donors, as well as staff impressions of each respective donor. The staff commentary is largely voiced by women, for women—and as Le Troter notes, this is intended to develop trust between the cryobank and its clients. Yet, the commentary undermines any notion of trust, as the company controls their employees' speech. Each recording of a staff member's impression of a donor follows a set format: a question or prompt is given to the donor ("Donor 5128

describes the most difficult time in his life"), followed by the donor's answer, and a final comment by the staff member.¹⁸ Listening to the various interviews and staff comments, Le Troter was struck by the way language is used to transform individual donors into generic, marketable candidates: "I think the company sells adjectives, sells the words first, before selling the sperm."¹⁹ In the recordings, each donor describes his family, childhood, and hopes for the future, while employees provide their impressions of donors' genetic qualities, hobbies, values, and physical traits. Altogether, the samples form portraits of prospective donors, which Le Troter distorts through the repetition of certain phrases, utterances, and pauses:

Donor 5151 5155 5164 52 52 5222

Is.. and

And um

Be the best version of himself

And um

Family is extremely important to him

He is a scientist so he's very intelligent

Hot

And um

Bit shy at first

Hot

But once he opens up, he really opens up

Pause

I remember (male voice)

Is

He's not afraid to express himself

And um

Uhm

He is adventurous and enjoys the outdoors (male voice)

And has very specific goals

Was amazing (male voice)

Uhm

He

And has

Well I just began my career in law, in the legal field (male voice)

And um

I aspire to be a lawyer, uhm (male voice)

And uh (male voice)

And um

And uh hopefully I will be a good one (male voice)

Absolutely do (male voice)

And um

*pause*²⁰

Titled *The Four Fs: Family, Finance, Faith, and Friends*, the linguistic score transforms recorded donor interviews and staff feedback into a percussive beat, which the artist describes as, “a children’s nursery rhyme of quasi-mechanical voices, with an endless rhythm of adjectives that multiply in search of a hypnotic ideal.”²¹ Le Troter’s use of alliteration in the title is a nod to her background in poetry and writing, as well as the four primal drives that animals—including humans—are evolutionarily adapted to have, follow, and achieve in order to survive: fight, flight, feed, and fuck.²² By substituting the four Fs, with the four subjects most commonly discussed in the cryobank’s descriptions of its donors, Le Troter comments on the capitalist approach to conception and the new categories this approach requires in order for donor sperm to survive and thrive (i.e., be chosen and used to propagate new life).²³ The language the cryobank staff uses to describe sperm donors revolves around adjectives that promote a superficial ideal, essentially marketing sperm to potential users—a strategy that circumvents the scientific truism that “evolution only ‘cares about’ who survives, and that means, basically, who excels in the four Fs: feeding, fleeing, fighting, and reproducing.”²⁴

In addition to the sound piece, Le Troter has transformed the Nasher’s Corner Gallery into a space to listen, giving words and language a body to communicate. A glass door seals off the gallery from the rest of the museum, protecting it from outside noise, while the floor and two of the walls are covered by carpet, softening the space for better acoustics. A third wall bears a dot pattern that upon close inspection reveals miniature childhood photographs of donors—freely available on the cryobank’s website—inset within each peephole. These numerous tiny portraits provide visual clues about potential offspring and underscore the disparity between the generic language characterizing individual donors and each one’s unique, physical appearance. Emphasizing the connections between sound, language, and the body, Le Troter has provided visitors a place to sit and experience her work by installing benches with seats made of woven audio cable throughout the gallery. The woven cable also carries sound to speakers mounted to rotating turntables the artist suspended from the ceiling, casting sound in all directions. As the speakers rotate to-and-fro, their cables lift and tighten, then drop and relax in a slow rhythm—movement Le Troter likens to a breathing cycle, describing the installation as “... a body beginning to come to life.”²⁵

Inspired by such science fiction novels as H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), Le Troter’s sound installation considers the role of language as a marketing tool used to sell an ideal.



Installation view: Anne Le Troter, *The Four Fs: Family, Finance, Faith, and Friends*, 2018, Biennale de Rennes, Rennes, France, September 29 – December 2, 2018. Photo: Aurélian Mole.

Sightings: Anne Le Troter is the artist’s first US commission and her first work in the English language.

About Anne Le Troter

Anne Le Troter was born in 1985 in Saint-Étienne (France), and lives and works in Paris. She studied at Genève University of Art and Design (HEAD—Genève, Switzerland) and ESADSE (Saint-Étienne Higher School of Art and Design). Her work has been the subject of several solo exhibitions, including: Le Grand Café, Saint-Nazaire, France (2019), FMAC, Artgenève (2018), Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2017), the Arnaud Deschin Gallery, Paris (2016), BF15, Lyon (2015), Espace Crosnier, Genève (2015) and Espace Quark, Genève (2014). She has also taken part in a large number of group shows, including *In & Out*, at La Villa du Parc, Annemasse (2016); *RUN RUN RUN*, at La Station and La Villa Arson, Nice (2016); the 60th Salon de Montrouge (2015); *The Generic Way*, Zabriskie Point, Genève (2015); *Diversi Muri—dun omaggio a N.O.F.4*, at the Istituto Svizzero di Roma (2015); *Le pas funambule*, at the Galerie Piano Mobile, Genève (2013); and *Une exposition à être lue, Volume 2*, at LiveInYourHead, Genève (2011). Le Troter was nominated for the 20th Fondation d’Entreprise Ricard Prize and was awarded the Grand Prix at the 61st Salon de Montrouge (2016) and Swiss Art Awards in 2013.

¹ Caroline Engle, "Interview with Anne Le Troter," *La Belle Revue* (2016): <https://www.labellerevue.org/en/focus/2016/interview-with-anne-le-troter> [accessed October 8, 2019].

² Raphaël Brunel, "Interview: Anne Le Troter," *Zéro Deux*, no. 81 (Spring 2017): <https://www.zerodeux.fr/en/interviews-en/anne-le-troter-2/> [accessed October 8, 2019].

³ Engle, "Interview with Anne Le Troter," *Zéro Deux*.

⁴ Héros-Limite Editions, 2013.

⁵ Brunel, "Interview: Anne Le Troter," *Zéro Deux*.

⁶ See: Chris Thompson, *Felt: Fluxus, Joseph Beuys, and the Dalai Lama* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): 63-64. See also: Brunel, "Interview: Anne Le Troter," *Zéro Deux*.

⁷ Thompson, *Felt: Fluxus*, 63-64.

⁸ To listen to this work, see: <https://soundcloud.com/anne-le-troter/fifi-riri-loulou-anne-le> [accessed October 11, 2019].

⁹ To listen to this work, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eApqLeu0pi8> [accessed October 11, 2019].

¹⁰ "Les journées Moleksins commencent à 8h et se terminent à 20h. / Contrairement à l'avis Moleksins ma journée a commencé dès 9h. Plein soleil en Norvège." Author's translation. In 1963, Fluxus artist Robert Filliou declared his birthday—January 17—as Art's birthday. This statement, made in a bar in Paris, led to several "Art Birthday" parties all over the world. See: *Lehren Und Lernen Als Aufuehrungskuenste: Teaching and Learning As Performing Arts* Vonby Robert Filliou Und Dem Leser, *Wenn Er Will. Unter Mitwirkung Von John Cage* [Et Al.] (Koeln: Koenig, 1970).

¹¹ This shift in approach to making was prompted by Le Troter's temporary loss of her voice. Brunel, "Interview: Anne Le Troter," *Zéro Deux*.

¹² *Les silences après une question*, 2017, Lyon Biennial, September 20 – November 16, 2017.

¹³ *Les mitoyennes*, 2015, Lyon Biennial, September 11 – November 7, 2015.

¹⁴ Le Troter's exhibition *Liste à puces* marked the artist's first solo show in a contemporary art center in Paris and was the result of Le Troter winning the grand prize of the 61st Salon de Montrouge in 2016. *Liste à puces* was on view at the Palais de Tokyo, February 2 – May 8, 2017.

¹⁵ *De l'interprétariat*, Arnaud Deschin Galerie, Paris, September 14 – October 14, 2016.

¹⁶ Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love (1920)" in Domenic Stansberry, ed., *Dada Manifesto* (San Francisco, CA: Molotov Editions, 2016).

¹⁷ Emily Kwong, "Some People Get 'Brain Tingles' From These Slime Videos. What's Behind the Feeling?" *NPR*, October 17, 2019: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/10/17/770696925/some-people-get-brain-tingles-from-these-slime-videos-what-s-behind-the-feeling> [accessed October 17, 2019]. For a sampling of ASMR triggers, see: "ASMR 50+ Triggers over 3 Hours (no talking) Ear Cleaning, Massage, Tapping, Peeling, Umbrella & More," June 17, 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXp0hTkXiks> [accessed October 14, 2019].

¹⁸ Email correspondence with the author, December 29, 2017.

¹⁹ "Je crois que l'entreprise vend des adjectifs, vend de la parole d'abord avant de vendre du sperme." Quoted in Guillaume Lasserre, "Sculpter le langage. La poésie sonore d'Anne Le Troter," *Mediapart*, March 11, 2019: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/guillaume-lasserre/blog/280219/sculpter-le-langage-la-poesie-sonore-danne-le-troter> [accessed October 11, 2019]. Author's translation.

²⁰ Transcription sample of Anne Le Troter, *The Four Fs: Family, Finance, Faith, and Friends* (2018), sound installation, 17 minutes. Transcription starting at 10:40. Transcribed by Caroline Card.

²¹ Email correspondence with the author, June 1, 2019.

²² The idea of four basic biological drives was first introduced by psychologist and neurosurgeon Karl H. Pribram in a series of articles published in the 1950s and 1960s. Pribram assigned control of the four drives to the body's limbic system. See Pribram, "A Review of Theory in Physiological Psychology," *Annual Review of Psychology* 60, no. 1 (1960): 11-15. The four Fs continue to be referenced in contemporary psychology, notably in the widely used textbook, *Psychology Themes and Variations*, where they are described as the "basic biological drives related to survival," and controlled by the brain's hypothalamus. See: Wayne Weiten, *Psychology Themes and Variations* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013): 100.

²³ In recent decades, advertising and marketing companies have co-opted scientific research on these basic biological urges to try to identify human motivations, develop customer loyalty, and market and sell commodities and ideas. See: Richard C. Maddock, *Motigraphics: The Analysis and Measurement of Human Motivations in Marketing* (London: Quorum Books, 2000): 140-142.

²⁴ Patricia S. Churchland, V.S. Ramachandran, and Terrence J. Sejnowski, "A Critique of Pure Vision," in Christof Koch and Joel L. Davis eds., *Large-Scale Theories of the Brain* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1994), 59-60.

²⁵ Interview with Éva Prouteau, "Anne Le Troter: Parler de loin ou bien se taire [At a distance speak, or hold your tongue]," Grand Café, Centre d'art contemporain Saint-Nazaire, November 25, 2018: <http://www.grandcafe-saintnazaire.fr/en/projets/681-le-troter.html> [accessed October 11, 2019].

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ABOVE: Installation view: Anne Le Troter, *The Four Fs: Family, Finance, Faith, and Friends*, 2018, Biennale de Rennes, Rennes, France, September 29 – December 2, 2018. Photo: Aurélian Mole.

COVER: Installation view: *Parler de loin ou bien se taire* (At a distance speak, or hold your tongue), Grand Café, Centre d'art contemporain, Saint-Nazaire, February 2 – April 21, 2019.