

# Function 15

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# Lili Huston-Herterich & Lucas Soi



*Social Politics in the Arts & Curatorial Practices*



Lucas Soi is an independent curator and the founder of Soi Fischer, a private consulting firm based in Toronto. Soi studied English at the University of British Columbia. Notable exhibitions that Soi has curated under the heading of Soi Fischer have been in galleries such as Cooper Cole, Xspace, and Butcher Gallery. Soi has also worked with Erin Stump Projects (ESP), The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, and Art Metropole. Soi is the director and curator of the Thematic Residency Program at Artscape Gibraltar Point.

Lili Huston-Herterich is a Toronto-based artist and curator. Originally from Chicago, Huston-Herterich graduated from York University in 2010 with a bachelor of fine arts in visual art and new media. In 2012 Huston-Herterich was awarded the Emerging Visual Artist's Grant from the Toronto Arts Council. Huston-Herterich has exhibited at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, The Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Xspace, and Gallery TPW, among others. In 2009, along with fellow artist Brad Tinmouth, Huston-Herterich founded Butcher Gallery, which had regular exhibitions for three years and is now pursuing "All Terrain" exhibitions. This year, her installation work will be exhibited at OCAD University for Nuit Blanche 2014.

Interview conducted on February 7th, 2014 at 263 Adelaide, Toronto.

Interview conducted by Function Magazine.

**Function:** Let's start off with having you guys explain the history of your friendship and collaboration with each other.

**Lili Huston-Herterich:** We started from Vancouver.

**Lucas Soi:** We met in person in Vancouver after we first met on the internet.

Ya we met on the Internet, I think through Preteen Gallery, because Lucas had an exhibition at Preteen Gallery in 2009.

Right, which is a gallery in Mexico City, and he [Gerardo Contreras] was very active in finding talent through the Internet which meant he had an international scope. He curated Brad Tinmouth who was Lili's partner at Butcher Gallery, and I was interested not only because of Brad's practice but because he was from Canada and was working out of Toronto. Brad had links to all his friends and that's how I learned about Lili and her practice.

I was in an exhibition, the second Soi Fischer exhibition, and I met Lucas in person in Vancouver in 2010.

I'm interested in both of your ideas on alternative forms of exhibition beyond the

white cube. Lucas, you curated an exhibition in Ian Carr-Harris' studio titled *The Kitchen and Lili*; Butcher Gallery is an obvious example of this but also more recently the exhibition you curated in an abandoned apartment with Nadia Belerique titled *Don't Call it a Breakdown, Call it a Breakthrough!* Is there an aspect of institutional critique in these exhibitions, or are these alternative locations important to the curatorial concept of the exhibitions?

The exhibition that I curated with Nadia Belerique was in an empty apartment that we mounted in one day and we did not light. It was a really spacious apartment with a lot of windows. All of the work was lit only by natural light and the exhibition obviously changed depending on the time of day that you were in the space. It was from 1 p.m. to dusk, and then after the light ran out in the summer it was over. That was a really great experience for me because, I mean Butcher Gallery too was in a living room and is now All-Terrain, which means that we're doing projects mounted anywhere but a set space.

What I really like about that is not that I find a problem with any kind of institutional or formalized exhibition space, but I think that there's something to be said about the narrative of a space and how that contributes to work. Interjecting artwork with atypical spaces is



really interesting for me. It just seems like an extension of my practice, so as an artist and curator it feels more just to work with a ready-made space rather than to work with a blank canvas.

Well I think the show that you recently did with Nadia is a great example of what I think is a strategy that has developed out of us having the Internet. This generation of artists and exhibition makers has this incredible platform that is a part of everything that we do. If we do a physical show in a white cube you've got documentation, you put that online and that's how everyone sees the show. No one experiences the show in person. All of us are learning and seeing art virtually. So in Lili's show, people were Instagramming the show at different times of the day when they happened to pop in. You guys did officially document it, right?

We documented it but not in one instance, we documented it over the course of the day.

Right, and so the light in this space is an element of the exhibition which you're not going to have in a white cube with static florescent lighting. The fact is that we can do a show anywhere, because everyone is going to see it online, they're just going to see it through documentation. That now frees up all the possibilities and potentials. Unfortunately I feel like all the existing galleries, for the most part, don't take advantage of all these things.

The Internet also renders neutral spaces as almost too neutral : the walls are desaturated and all the photographs are edited a particular way to showcase the work. It's really great to put something online that looks different because then you start thinking about an image,

and what makes an image — what makes documentation of an image and what makes an image in it of itself.

All Soi Fischer exhibitions have been documented really well, and The Kitchen was a good example of it because it was mounted on one side of the room, so you could see the entire narrative from one perspective, and then there were just detail shots of it.

My curatorial practice is based on the idea of privileging the exhibition as the ultimate work of art, and that requires you to see the entire exhibition in one shot. The shows are composed in that way, and then you can navigate it and start breaking it down into the individual components, learning more about the artists practices and so on.

I editorialize my documentation, so I'll work with a professional photographer, and I will have already taken all the photos on my digital camera and ask the professional photographer to replicate the compositions. I know in what order I'm going to present all those photographs so that as you read it on the web page, I'm

telling you a story. It's very conscious and its very deliberate.

That is a way of giving one version of the show and then any interested viewer is going to go back and look at the pictures differently, and search out those detail photographs. It's an amazing medium in which an exhibition maker like myself can work, because you do have that "IRL," In Real Life experience.

You can't think about only your local audience; you have to think about this international contemporary art world that we are all trying to be a part of. It's a single dialogue, and its one group, and that's international.

Lili maybe you could expand a bit more on Butcher Gallery going All-Terrain. You guys have already done the Air Show publication which was really interesting. Maybe you can talk a bit about going forward with your plans, and the strategy behind going All-Terrain.

Butcher Gallery, since its inception in 2009, was located in a living room modified to be a gallery space. The first location was in Brad Timmouth's apartment and we just emptied his living room and white-washed everything including the floors, and put lights up and mounted group exhibitions there for a year and a half.

Then we moved in together to Parkdale and had another opportunity to exhibit in a living room, in a bungalow which was a different vibe. Actually Lucas, when he first came to Toronto, stayed in that room for two or three weeks before he found a place, and slept in Butcher Gallery. He had a "Soi-Fischer Residency" on the pull-out couch.

We established it because, at least for me it was a worthwhile opportunity to make connections with these people that I was casually corresponding with online. I could call myself a co-director without really having any experience in co-direction, and just learned through my mistakes. It was a really good experience that way, but once we got to the point where we had already established ourselves it became really evident that that space was just a limitation rather than any kind of asset.

So we started All Terrain in the beginning of last year in 2013. There was also the issue that we are both artists, Brad and I both have our own practices and it didn't feel like we were lending anything to these artists. We wanted to collaborate more. We decided that what we could do to continue as collaborators with these artists that we wanted to work with, and

therefore respect their practice more than just mounting it and then taking it down, was to use the space as our main contribution.

All-Terrain is starting with four exhibitions based on the four elements; the first one is air. Air Show was an exhibition mounted in mid-air. We contacted artists from around the world, in Canada and elsewhere, and we asked them to respond to this prompt of a group exhibition mounted in mid-air. It was a very easy metaphor to relinquish our bounds, to let go of our falls and be more free and lucid, and kind of ambiguous.

The idea was that if we were to receive physical work they would be photographed in mid-air, literally. The documentation of the work became the exhibition. The exhibition resulted in an artist's book. It has perforated pages, so each page can come out and you can use it as the work, separately. You can rearrange the work in the book or you can just use it as a book called Air Show that is a collection of these 10 artists' response to our circumstances.

The curatorial premise for Air Show is again experimenting with the sites of art exhibition and where art can live. That was a really extreme initiative and the question is, is the art living in a publication, is the exhibition space in the pages of a book or is that just documentation of that physical experience of it being in the air?

People used to ask us that all the time when it first came out, and my response is really pushy and not very accommodating, and it's that this is the exhibition. You are experiencing the exhibition. The exhibition is in this format.

So you can choose to view it aesthetically, like how image is juxtaposed with image due to the format of how a book is. Or you can take out



the pages and rearrange it. Or you can look at it as documentation. Now you are investing your imagination into thinking about the surrounding circumstances.

And documentation as exhibition in it of itself, which is something that I work with a lot.

I think that one thing that we share in our respective curatorial practice is that we push the artist to exceed their expectations of themselves. We push them to learn more about their own practice, to discover more through the process of working.

I think that Lili having a concept for her exhibition that is very authoritative and requires the artist to use what they have in order to execute the project. I think artists are given a lot of deference, that whatever you do is enough. But the fact is that artists are creators, they have new ideas all the time, and they love nothing more than working, evolving, and experimenting. I feel that one aspect of curatorial practice can be pitching artists' ideas and giving



them new scenarios and opportunities that they can respond to.

I feel that is a total win-win situation. It makes for a more dynamic and exciting exhibition and it also helps the artist be seen in a greater light.

It requires a particular kind of artist too. My idea was that if someone's down to work with me at Butcher Gallery, then their practice has gotten to a point in which I feel I can get behind.

I'm interested in artists who have an expanded notion of their practice. It's an easy way to gage whether or not you are compatible to work with someone, if they're open to your proposal. If they're not then that means you're not working with an artist that you can get anything out of. It's a very good PH test.

If I'm not mistaken you started your curatorial practice to broaden your social world, and you've always worked very closely with everyone. Versus my practice, that I think the first four shows I did I didn't know 70 per cent of the artists in those group shows. I just saw objects, or an image of an object online and I asked them to mail it to me.

My practice was that very traditional curatorial over-see and organizer of objects, and just coming up with original theses after the fact, after I'd gotten the work together and then working backwards, saying "Why did I bring this work together and what does it have in common? Can I come with an overarching theme or thesis to link it all?"

Now it's naturally progressed into working very closely with individuals who I see on a regular basis that I know personally. But it's still important to me to always have a broad scope. Every exhibition I do has a local, a national, and an international artist involved. That's just to create links between these disparate practices

geographically by showing that we're all working in the same line of thought.

Because I was working with objects, the artist didn't have to leave their comfort zone in order to participate in the exhibition, yet in the result that final exhibition, they saw their work presented in a totally new light.

We used to fabricate artists' work. We would ask them for their concept or maybe see a work online and say this is really great.

"Andreas Banderas, you make installation work with a mirror and all these different arbitrary elements, we'd love this. You're in Oslo; we have zero budget. Give us instructions on how to make it and a list of materials and we'll make it and photograph it for you and get your approval."

Nadia and I did that also with Aude Pariset, who's an artist from Paris. She got us to make this very unusual sculpture that we made the night before the opening. But that's no skin off their back. We'll do the work for you.

Lucas, in reading the exhibition statements produced by Soi Fischer, I see a common theme of building a back-story, or narrative context, for each exhibition that goes beyond art theory; whether it is 19th century France and the production of silk (De-Accessioned), or the American dot-com boom in the 1990's (At the Long Table). And Lili you recently employed a similar technique with your exhibition Pleasure of a Lazy Laity, where you provided an exhibition text, written by Jessica Carroll, that when paired with the documentation images, told the story of the artist and two friends in the space. I would be interested in hearing both of your thoughts on the use of narratives in your curatorial and artistic practices.

The classic definition of a curator as a caretaker of ancient objects that were selected by other people still holds true to this day, in museum studies and people who study art history. While a curator can be administrator or a researcher, the curator can also be an artist. I believe that is the foundation of my practice because I started as an artist.

The idea of coming up with a unique thesis, a concept, in which to do a show stems from that original impulse. Toronto has a very unique precedence in curatorial practice where the curator acts as an auteur. They are the ultimate author of the exhibition and they can include not only contemporary art objects — living artists' work — but also memorabilia.

Ydessa Hendeles, who is very famous in Toronto, started as a collector then ran a commercial gallery for many years, and then started her curatorial practice. Now she's actually evolved into an artist. So she kind of did it backwards; usually it goes artist to curator, to collector, to dealer. In any case we have this amazing example where she would just show a whole bunch of stuff that meant a lot to her, yet there was a through line and all these disparate objects shared a single idea behind them.

Most recently we've seen that influence in the last exhibition at the Power Plant, Micah Lexier's One and Two and More Than Two, which Lili was a part of as an artist. Where Mica worked as a collector essentially, he made one piece out of these hundreds of individual pieces, and that's a direct decedent from Ydessa Hendeles.

Also, being from Vancouver, writing is extremely important to contemporary art practice. Artists are very active in writing about their own practices and so the exhibition text is a vital part of every show. With my background being in English Literature, that was a very natural way for my practice to evolve. It's a way for me to

contribute to this enterprise, other than just being an organizer and physically putting things together.

Writing is a way that you can lend your unique take on things that is by no means definitive. It is one subjective opinion, and it's just a way for you to start your own thinking. It can just be a catalyst for you to be like "I don't agree with that, because I think this", but if you hadn't had that text to disagree with, who knows if you would have taken the interest to activate your own thinking.

Lucas is really good at making an exhibition feel much more important culturally and historically. It's really important to be able to have it contextualized, and the use of narrative is a really smart way to do that for you.

There's not enough people who are open to write about art and not mention the work. The work was conceived with so many pretenses and too often we are terrified to challenge these and apply our own presumptions to someone else's ideas. That's something that I think is really missing in this city particularly, and something that Lucas has made a point to maintain in his practice.

Jessica Carroll, a Toronto-based writer, contributed a piece of writing based on a series of conversations we had to my solo exhibition at XPACE, *Pleasure of a Lazy Laity*. She wrote a script, and I used it as a supplement in the exhibition, not as my own but as Jessica Carol's work.

It was not tied to the exhibition at all but rather a gathering of her influence or of our relationship, and what had been going on in her life, and what had been going on in my life, and a synchronicity of those things. It was really difficult for people to grab that piece of text and read it as a script and then walk into the space

that kind of looks like a stage and try to force the two together. Ultimately the idea is that nothing really fits, so you should just work with what you have and see. The most satisfying point is when you can come to terms with the idea that you, as an art-viewer, have full authority to decide what matters and what doesn't. If you can get there, if you can ignore my installation and cherish Jess' writing or vice versa, I would consider that sincere engagement.

What I really respect about Lili's practice is that where she is so multitalented is that she brings all this real-world experience like administration and registration; Lili worked at a commercial gallery as co-director for three years. Having that perspective and then being able to guide artists' practices, create exhibitions with them, and then have a solo practice where you incorporate your different talents from those other fields is really unique.

I think that she's a real force in our city in showing the potential of what one person can do and all the different projects they can engage in with equal passion, focus, and interest. It's a great example of the artist in the 21st century.

The reality of the longevity of exhibitions today is mainly through exhibition statements and documentation images distributed online. Are your uses of narratives, alternative locations, and unconventional documentation an effort to provide an enhanced or alternative experience of the exhibition for the screen-based viewer? Is there ever the thought of 'Oh this will look great as documentation' during the production of an exhibition?

I think that that is the burden of exhibition-making, because I think that that totally controls how everyone mounts their exhibition,

or anyone who's smart, because they know that the most play they're going to get out of it is whatever happens on the Internet. They're not going to get thousands of people through their little gallery in Toronto, or at least not as many as they'll get after the fact, once they put it up online.

That is something that I think about a lot as kind of a distraction, in terms of exhibition making, because there is such weight to a space. I think documentation isn't the contrary to aura, but I think that there is such weight to a space that gets overshadowed by the idea of composition, and I don't necessarily think that spatial composition is something that can be rendered or synchronized with photographic composition. I think that those two things are really different.

My solo at XPACE was an installation that was impossible, because of the way I arranged it and the particular dimensions of the space, to photograph it cumulatively. But that's ok, because my intention from the start was to document it as a narrative. I documented it in small vignettes with people in the space. Those images were an effort to get away from that idea of mounting an exhibition for documentation. When I was first installing shows at Butcher Gallery but also very modestly contributing to group exhibitions, all I needed was the image. I did not need to put my work up on a wall next to someone else's; that was not what was interesting to me. I think that's kind of too bad, but you have to start somewhere.

We can talk about Brad Troemel's thesis project, at the Art Institute of Chicago, called An Immaterial Study of Our Peers which I was included in, as well as Brad Tinmouth. He photographed the Sullivan Galleries which is this huge space at the School of Art Institute, empty, and then Photoshopped in artists' works

that he had contacted around the world. So it was an exhibition of these often times very large-scale sculptural works that were just Photoshopped, masterfully, kind of into this space and called it a show, and that was totally enough.

Sending him a jpeg of a photograph, or a digital image that I had never printed and I have never printed, delegating some size to it that was totally arbitrary and then ‘mounting it,’ and giving him directions for installation. It mimicked the experience of mounting an exhibition without even having to touch anything which I thought was really nice and clean and clever.

In my own practice, every show I do is in a new location. My practice is very site-specific, so it always begins with walking into the space, and then having work and ideas and shows on my mind but walking into a space and saying ‘oh this is the perfect space for this show that I’m thinking of.’ Whether that’s using a mantle-piece in an apartment room or using an artist’s studio. So you custom-tailor the show to the space, utilizing the space as an intrinsic piece in the entire show. The exhibitions are always created physically for how they’re going to live and work in the space.

When it comes to documentation, the way that you look at the show in person and how you navigate it informs your first pass at how you’re going to photograph the show. Then you realize that some things don’t translate from the physical experience of the room to how it looks in a photo. Then you start composing photographs to more accurately reflect the experience that you’re having in the space, but you’re going to basically create a fictional photo which hopes to mimic that same thing.

You just derive direction for the documentation from your physical experience but afterwards

the documentation and how you edit it, the order in which you present the photos, is its own experience.

When we talked about the direction of this conversation we mentioned the notion of social politics. The importance or value of this idea is often overlooked or is something people do, but don’t talk about.

This leads me to the question of perceived power or assumed power by an artist or curator. Lucas, your choice to brand yourself as Soi Fischer, a private consulting firm, raises your practice to some sort of higher level of professionalism beyond that of a freelance curator. Also, Lili you have mentioned the establishment of Butcher Gallery as a similar pursuit.

Could you both elaborate on your strategies with these particular examples, and perhaps your views on the broader issue of social politics in the arts?

For me it was all strategy, and I think it’s still working. I ran into Jon Rafman last night, and the only way that I know him, and he respects me, is because I told him that I was a curator when I was 19. That’s not true; hopefully he respects me for other reasons.

Having Brad as a partner was really powerful, it was very easy for us to walk into a room and be like “Hi we’re Brad and Lili from Butcher Gallery” as if we had been doing it forever and you had just heard of us. It ends up being a little bit like a wolf in a herd of sheep-type thing, where you’re immersing yourself into something to become totally versed in it so you can screw with it later.

It was really strategic to grant myself access to areas of the art world that artists don’t normally have. They just brand themselves as artists because there’s a particular place for each

person. I don’t necessarily think that that’s right. There’s a particular place for a critic, a curator, and a dealer. If you kind of secretly traverse all of those you have a better chance of maintaining your presence.

The traditional role of the independent curator is that you are alone, and you’re not doing anything until you’ve linked up with an organization and you’re working on a project. But what if you were to be very active and spread yourself wide? The easiest way for everyone to look at that is as a singular practice and to recognize that is to create an organization around yourself.

This is what artists did in Canada in the 1970s. That is the root of the artist-run centre. There were all these individuals; they got together, they had a place to work from and this led to financing from the federal government, and then the municipal and provincial governments got involved in the following decades.

So how can I profit from my practice? An artist manufactures an object to sell and that’s that traditional “I give you something and you give me something in return.” So how do I finance my practice where I am not exactly selling any concrete things? I created a firm and what this firm does is it consults with anyone and everyone.

There are no limitations to our partnerships, we can partner with a bank, art gallery, or a private business. What we are doing is expanding the role of contemporary art in mainstream society. That is my goal. Everybody in the arts is trying to get a small slice of that pie, of that Canada Council pie, or that private dealer’s time to get an exhibition once every two years. My goal is to make the pie bigger.

That is to create new opportunities where contemporary art can live. It goes right back to the foundations of our curatorial practice.

The language that I have now started using in describing my practice denotes Soi Fischer as a private consulting firm whose services include content design, audience management, and business development. This is language that mainstream society understands.

I believe that we, in our industry, can begin to communicate in more relevant ways rather than just closed communication. I’m not just talking about ‘art-speak’ but I’m also talking about how we engage socially and what we do when we say we’re an artist. If you’re talking to someone who’s not in the industry, how do we talk about ourselves? If we can embrace the strengths of communication, and learn that through simple language we can talk about what we do and how we do it, and we’re not dumbing anything down to relay it to a different audience.

Through the language we use we can begin to create new alliances and new opportunities.

It’s kind of a conversation that always for me leads into the concepts of entrepreneurialism. People always call artists entrepreneurs just because they work independently, but I don’t think that that’s enough. I think that there’s something to be said about nuances of language — of branding, of making yourself available, and deciding who you’re working with — is what true entrepreneurialism is. It’s not necessarily an individual working for themselves, but it’s using your resources and working with other people to create basically a monster.

To get jobs.

To get jobs, to make money.

Soi Fischer - The Kitchen



Brad Troemel - An Immaterial Study of Our Peers



Butcher Gallery - At The Long Table



curated by Soi Fischer

Preteen Gallery



Micah Lexier - One, and Two, and More Than Two

Lili Huston Hererich - Pleasure of A Lazy Lally



Ydessa Hendeles - The Wedding



Soi Fischer - Sea Change

