

# Momus

## Where the Bodies Go: Lili Huston-Herterich's Poem to the Power of Community

2017-03-22 10:03:42 Sky Goodden

When Stephan Jost began as director of the [AGO](#) last Spring, he gave a speech to about 60 of us in a sunlit arcade, citing the importance of community. We were standing before a wall of windows surveying Toronto's particular patchwork. I remember looking to my left and my right, and noting who had been invited, who was missing – and if anyone was there that I'd need to avoid.

"Community" is a term that gets used by people in powerful positions looking to rouse easy enthusiasms; by people looking to suggest that their podium is merely a mound for perspective, not privilege. I don't consider myself to be participating in a community, most of the time. I'm reminded of a joke from *Seinfeld*, where Elaine, fretting what people will think if they discover she dumped a man after he had a stroke, shouts, "I'll be ostracized by the community!" Jerry matches her hysteria with his own: "Community? There's a community?? All this time, I've been living in a community! I had no idea."

And while the recently-hired executive of our largest museum wasn't reaching for new language, exactly, his usage landed more pointedly, even sharply, than we normally hear it. Jost was noting a lack, in Toronto. A competitiveness, maybe, or an isolationist, go-it-alone quality in our artists. I don't know who he'd been talking to in Hawaii, but it felt like an observation from someone who was seeing us clearly.

I gave some thought to this corrective emphasis on community during the two seasons that followed, wherein Toronto would make a rare and manifold effort at self-historicizing – regarding an art history rich in collectivity. Meanwhile, many people participating in this recollecting moment were also helping to renew us (starting new galleries, assuming new curatorial roles). Perhaps it befits this city's current momentum, I thought, that the generation undertaking most of our contemporary memorialization is, in fact, quite young. Because, if only for want of resources, youth tends to beget collaboration.

[Lili Huston-Herterich](#) is a particular exception to Jost's observation about our insular habits. Her emerging practice is often engaged with those of [Laurie Kang](#) and [Nadia Belerique](#); and, in her exhibition *Chroma Lives*, she and co-curator Erin Freedman played with the dials of time, including artists both alive and dead; and provided a splash of local color in a way historical exhibitions rarely do. They affected something puckish and bright.

Huston-Herterich's [current exhibition](#) at the emerging gallery Zalucky Contemporary reaches for community further still, and more directly. Titling her show *We of the Middling Sort*, she invites us into a plurality from the first. Local politics meets a history in the making, as the artist works in the wake of the recent protests to the American presidential inauguration, and calls up the history of the Junction, the Toronto neighborhood in which Zalucky Contemporary (and this author) resides.

This area's narrative is one of unusual collectivity and activism. When it was a town called West Toronto, through which trains passed, and in which industrial manufacture was the foremost trade – two surprising things happened. First, its community successfully protested the incursion of toxic waste, and moved the offending industries further away; and then, following a pattern of drunken fighting in the streets by transient train travelers and local workers (with patience tipped by a murder), the community voted to ban the sale of alcohol. This prohibition lasted, unbelievably, until 2000.

Huston-Herterich perpetuated her collaborative practice through this singular neighborhood – and through an emerging gallery that has meaningfully established itself in the area – and invited Junction residents to donate used clothing. From these she made ornamented and lyric photograms that line the thin gallery, peopled by dancing skeletons. T-shirts move in profile, necklaces braiding through them; hemlines count their stitches; tank tops, from bird's eye, appear vertiginous and voided; the belly of a cotton jersey stretches across the plane so as to distort and move like a wave.

People donated the material as though making an offering to a greater cause. Many of them declined to be identified, apparently, but came through the gallery all the same, to check on their belongings. There is, in this, the moving markers of a community – the real thing, not just the "verbal hologram" (as coined by skeptic Leslie Savan). Community is a group of people that checks in on its own.

Footing the gallery is a towering quilt punctuated by sleeves: spaces once filled with a multitude of arms, outstretched or upraised. Evoking the energy of protest, of limbs rising up, this multi-color patchwork softens – humanizes – its political bearing with an air of well-worn domesticity, a common focus of Huston-Herterich's. The evacuated, exhausted, purely potential space of these sleeves is complemented by clay sculptures that weight the gallery's pictures. They profile the shape left by a clenched fist – an image both appropriate to holding on (whether dearly or desperately), and unyielding.

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) begins – and ends – with the epigram: "The mediator between the HEAD and HANDS must be the HEART." As Andrew Bolt, curator of the Metropolitan Museum's popular *Manus x Machina* exhibition (2016), notes, "Given Lang's dystopian vision of technology, the epigram could quite easily have been rephrased, 'the mediator between the HAND and the MACHINE must be the HEART'." I think of this because one of the most poignant aspects of Huston-Herterich's evocation of community, activism, and the conversation of history, is her choice of media. The photogram is a technology that removes the technological device, and presses – like a leaf staining the sidewalk from the light of the sun – the immediacy of things together through time. It's a powerful use of material – a commentary made through the most important choice an artist can make. And here, a simple, resonating evocation of bodies gone through the traces of bodies present, gives us a light-and-dark doubling: a poem to protest, a reminder that between the hand and the heart, the sleeves must be filled.