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## “Curator’s essay traduces my wife’s work” says husband of Lee Bontecou

William Giles stated that an essay by Robert Storr misrepresented Bontecou's work

**Jason Edward Kaufman**

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### New York

Less than two weeks before the Lee Bontecou retrospective opened at the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (until 11 January; it will travel to Chicago and New York), the artist’s husband, William Giles, issued a press release stating that an essay by Robert Storr, former senior curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, misrepresented his wife’s work by bringing it into relation with various artists irrelevant to her development. The catalogues had already been printed, but a one-page statement by the artist was tipped into the 2,500 paperbacks before they were shipped to museum shops (the hardback trade edition by Harry N Abrams was not amended). Then, days before the opening, Mr Giles, himself an artist who twice showed at Leo Castelli in 1959 and 1960, but whose career since then has failed to take off, launched an even more vitriolic “Open letter to Robert Storr” in which he accused the

distinguished art historian of, among other things, inserting references in his essay to promote sales of a colleague's book.

When the artist arrived at her opening (her husband did not attend), she had yet to read her husband's latest diatribe, and when she did, she issued a statement of her own: "My husband, William Giles, has his own point of view, but he does not speak for me. I am proud of this retrospective exhibition and publication, which I believe truly represent the history of my work to date."

"We were thrilled with Rob's essay," said Ann Philbin, director of the Hammer and co-organiser of the show. "It is exactly what we invited him to do, which is to contextualise her work in late 20th-century art." Co-curator Elizabeth Smith of the MCA in Chicago, said Mr Storr did not interview Ms Bontecou, but that was not his assignment. "It is incumbent upon us to present not just the perspective of [the artist], but to put it in a cultural context."

Robert Storr told The Art Newspaper that he has admired Lee Bontecou's work since the 1960s, and was instrumental in securing her retrospective for MoMA next year. Researching his essay, he "read everything published on her, including all of her written statements and interviews." Should he have consulted the artist? "In my time at MoMA, I never showed an essay to an artist about whom I was writing until it was published," he says. "It is important that curators and scholars have the freedom to say what they think. Museums have to maintain their critical independence. Catalogues are not vanity publications for artists. The artist is not the self-curator or self-author of the catalogue. And it is in the artist's best interest that this be so. That art can be approached in a number of ways is a measure of how rich it is."

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