When I first started studying creative writing and literature as an undergrad, Lisa Robertson was a name breathily mentioned by professors with such palpable reverence that it became magnetic to me—it had an aura. Young, green, and very new to the craft of poetry, I didn’t understand her much at first, yet I sensed in her work a level to which I often return, from which I always derive new pleasure and inspiration; I’ve revisited all of her books of poetry, her excellent book of essays called *Nilling*, and perhaps my favourite, something I would call my “Bible,” the anthology she co-edited with Matthew Stadler called *Revolution: A Reader*. She is also the author of the cult-famous book of essays called *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. In thinking about this issue’s theme when approaching Lisa for this interview, I saw the overarching thread of her work as a constant act of poiesis (meaning-making), and I saw eros as inextricable from that act. In chatting before the interview, I told her it would be all about shelter and learning and eros, to which she replied, “shelter and eros and learning are the same thing, right?” I knew then the interview would go well. It was conducted by email correspondence between her home in France, mine in Montreal, and Ontario, interrupted with her trips to the ocean and mine to the lakes, summer guests and getaways, hornet’s nests, family outings… over the staccato breaks of summer-time, which is a different sort of time…

Laura Broadbent You suggested in recent correspondence that shelter and learning and eros are the same thing. Besides the rather boring and well-tried representation of eros as romantic love, it is much more than that! I think this is obvious to some and not to most. To me, eros essentially means an animating force, a reach. Elusiveness is definitely key. A reaching in the dark. So one who loves learning and thinking and books and sentences, that animating love
is eros. Could you give a small mental tour of the shelters you have inhabited in this pursuit of learning? I think of any shelter that houses books. I lived in a cabin in Limekiln, California, during which time the crash of 2000, I felt to me like a ship. Of course I read a lot, setting up book-tables at all the academic conferences and readings in town, taking classes at KSW, and then beginning to teach there. When in 1984, I had to close the store, because of financial failure, before I liquidated the stock, I carefully chose from it all the books I thought I would need for the decade ahead. I think I chose pretty well—I'm still reading those books. They formed the core of a library that I've been shipping ahead of me at all the far-flung move—to Hatzic, B.C. (where I wrote Debbie), back to Vancouver, to France, to California, then back to France again. So for four years now I've needed to find a new place to live, my ex-husband and I had bought a house in 2004, I felt tied in a way that is a little hard to understand or describe, given my foreignness. I like the way the people live here, the relationships, and with mutual care. People eat what they raise or hunt. They make jam, and share and mend things. It feels like the local economy relates to people's lives. Sometimes when I am up late at night working, the farmers are also working late, seeding or harvesting til midnight. At this time I am working with Dumas, the little Romanesque village churches, the walnut trees, the medieval fressoises. There are nightingales for the entire month of May. So I paid 4L, ordered a new set of Ikea shelves and a couple of carpets, set up my books again, and laid low, writing essays and getting my last couple of books out. The first winter was rough—Stacy died, and the temperatures dropped to -20 for more than a month. My cheap woodstove was inadequate, I moved into one room, beside the stove. But summers are glorious with fruit trees everywhere, doors and windows open, and a clear sky.
Paris, with my partner, who is a writer and an artist.

The poet Andrea Brady, who teaches at Queen Mary University in London, encouraged me to apply for a visiting research fellowship in her department, and so I had the opportunity to go to London for a month in Fall 2012 to read at the library of the Warburg Institute. I had spent a few days here and there reading in the library the previous spring, in preparation for a catalogue essay I was writing for the Vancouver Art Gallery. I needed to find out about the early history of geometry when I first went there, so I was on the history of science floor, which includes magic, philosophy, cooking, medicine, astrology, gemology.... I began to realize the intensity of the place. It’s open stacks. Languages are not separated. Estimating spaces? I discovered open stacks were shelved beside shiny, new university-press editions. The dark carpets are sprinkled with constellation-like scatterings of shelves of paper and leather. Probably we’re breathing Renaissance-era pollens. Once I took down a large battered copy of The Anatomy of Melancholy, and it was a first edition, from Frances Yates’s library, which she had willed to the Institute. I kept that book on my desk for a month, just to absorb whatever it might be emitting. Also Elizabeth David’s Let’s Eat, which I had been reading and teaching about Aby Warburg in the past, without having visited the Institute. So thanks to Andrea and her colleagues, I found myself with a free apartment in East London, and a month to spend in this most idiosyncratic and profound collection. It was a very emotional experience. Here I was, a life-long library rat, someone who had been reading clandestinely and without method since childhood, being given the freedom to do as I liked. I was introduced to me by Denise Riley, the poet Pierre Hadot, a French historian of philosophy who has been extremely affected by the work of Eileen Myles, Dodie Bellamy. And I’ve been helped by those people, and many others. Living in rural places has looked more like retreat than it has felt, I suspect. An important part of my rationale has been economic, although I admit that the aesthetics do seduce me—trees and seasons and food and materials. Cities are extremely expensive places, especially with recent years’ intensification of neoliberal agendas. I’ve tended to go to the country to live and write, because time is a less of a luxury when you live very cheaply and have fewer outside diversions. Also living alone in the country makes of time an extremely palpable substance, one that exerts special forces on and within poems. I now crave that timesense, though I can’t take it for long. I’m not sure what you mean by rhythm... but I lived in the country for most of my childhood through to the early 1980s, again for just a year in the mid-1990s after I shut up shop in the mid 2000s for a couple of years when I first arrived in France, and for the past four years. The pace of the city is normal by middle age—I’m at the point now where it seems that a friend or family member or colleague dies almost monthly. So these spaces are simply part of my life, in a staccato way, not separate or special, and not welcome either. And I haven’t really ever stopped writing, maybe because I make a living by writing, maybe because through all the unevenness of the decades, this bookishness has been constant too, a necessary thread. I’m a freelance, with occasional bursts of full-time teaching since 1994, and a smattering of one-semester-long residencies and fellowships. Sometimes I’m slowly, and with undesired difficulty, that is certain, and sometimes a much greater proportion of my time is given over to reading, studying, researching—instead of “producing.” But basically I’ve been paid by the word for twenty years, with occasional grace and spaciousness provided by meagre grants. So I keep writing. An open book or two alongside a notebook is to me an elemental constitution. But there’s something I want to try to say about this relationship to life. I have been extremely affected by the work of Pierre Hadot, a French historian of philosophy introduced to me by Denise Riley, the poet and philosopher. Essentially, Hadot says that for the Epicureans, the Skeptics, and the Stoics, philosophy was not a professional expertise relating to the mastery of texts and discourses—it was a practice of living, whose end was a good life, a happy life. Ideally, like Hadot’s Helenistic and Roman Stoic, that writing is one part of living, not more or less important than the other parts, which we have introduced—reading, friendship, cooking, art, travelling, remunerated, etc. These activities are in a whole, and they are actually transform and become one another. In fact, I would rather not even think about parts, but of continuities. My writing on Vancouver as...
The Office for Soft Architecture, for example, was an extension of my twice-daily walks with my dog Angus, through East Vancouver, was an extension of my twice-daily walks with my dog Angus, through East Vancouver, into Inner Richmond, of 1960s, of Laura Broadbent / Lisa Robertson
The Body is My Mysterious Concept: Three Questions with Lisa Robertson

The most gorgeous sentences I have ever in what is the relation between form and structure idea of form always primary to your thinking? Like reflecting on what this means) rather than some suggested that form is about an assembly of composed language—it’s not always a clear relationship, yet it is a strong relationship, even if my conscious perceptions of it are often LB
Right. You speak similarly about writing being one equal part of living among many other parts in a recent essay I read of yours, where it was suggested that form is about an assembly of lived relationships (living with senses open and reflecting on what this means) rather than some fixed thing, and that form informs subjects. I see this way of thinking as “soft form” (soft as in living), and I see it too as the ethos behind The Office for Soft Architecture. I’m correct in saying that? In terms of the “writing part” of living, is the idea of form always primary to your thinking? Like what is the relation between form and structure in Cinema of the Present? And I mean, is my current medium the sentence (a fascination with its form, and its historical form), and you write some of the most gorgeous sentences I have ever read. But how do you conceive of their role in the overall structure of the book, which inevitably produces a fixed form in the end? LR I try to give an example. The Office for Soft Architecture being their project. I had been learning about the French documentary photographer Eugene Atget, and his work in early twentieth-century Paris, a city then undergoing large-scale change during the construction of Haussmann’s boulevards and the first metros. Neighbourhoods and ways of life were being made a record of this disappearance. I was witnessing in Vancouver, since the late 1980s and Expo, what seemed like a related urban transformation. I decided to try to document that, starting in the late 1980s, following Atget’s cue. The social and economic changes in the city, essentially the post-land development politics and the political manipulation of urban zoning, had a direct relationship to built and lived form. So I became interested in a politics of form, and its legibility and malleability as surface. This morphological interest in architectural appearance and surface as an expression of political experience in daily life started to incite me a critical perspective towards the idea of structure. In architectural aesthetics, especially modernist and historical dimensions, it has become dogmatic, at least since Le Corbusier, to suppress the articulation of surface affect, decorative conventions and expressions, in favour of what has seemed like a fetishization of structure. This has been the case in literary aesthetics as well—Pound’s rejection of Swinburne and the Victorians as decadent, for example, carried a moral dogmatism. Hal Foster recently discussed this dogmatism, and his argument about the moral decadence and decorative tropes was the central thesis of Adolf Loos’s Ornament and Crime, in 1908. The suppression of decoration in turn, became an argument about the creation of a structure through its own destruction. I mean, I want everything—I want the wildness and surprise of Oulipian destruction. I mean, I want everything—I want the wildness and surprise of Oulipian arbitrariness, and I want melodic development. I want the honey, the hydromel. I want the simultaneous possibility of identification and critique, where critique finds the potential of renewed forms of subjectivity. I want the poem to be a machine for its effect. As Le Corbusier said of architecture, but for me it has to be a soft machine, one that includes and reveals desire as both a destructive and a generative force. I continue to be interested in thinking about form. My new book, "On Physical Real Beginning and What Happens Next" is a series of individual poems and poem sequences that explore form as an originating problematic, taking Lucretius’s "On the Nature of Things" as a point of departure and return. I can’t say with any certainty at all what form is. This is exciting. As years pass, I know less, but it does get more supple, more capacious. I use these words, structure and form, more and more tentatively. But a clue that I return to is something Trish Salah said to me when we were in conversation as part of Margaret Atwood’s "The Eclogues" reading series at U of T, around 2008 I think. I was setting up an opposition between aesthetics and politics. Trish corrected me, with her characteristic generosity. She said to me, and this is my memory, so I won’t use quotation marks, that aesthetics are desire. I suddenly saw that form and aesthetics are the historical traces of the lives of our bodies. Embodiment is ongoing formal experience, and it’s always political. I’m for embodiment as form. I’m for form as embodiment, and I would like to have a good answer to the question that I want to enter into a living relationship with form in writing that marries all the peculiar, gitty, hilarious troubles and pleasures of bodily form to the work of structure: to the work of others’ thinking finds its site in the tracings of these relationships. The body is my mysterious concept.