

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Mary Jo Bang and David Lehman

Tuesday, October 18, 2016

Dia:Chelsea
535 West 22nd Street, 5th Floor
New York City

Introduction by Vincent Katz

David Lehman is a poet and teacher who lives and works in New York and Ithaca. He is the author several collections of poems, including *The Daily Mirror* (2000), *The Evening Sun* (2002), *When a Woman Loves a Man* (2005), *Yeshiva Boys* (2009), and *New and Selected Poems* (Scribner, 2013). Among his other books are *The Perfect Murder* (1989), a study of detective novels, and *The Last Avant-Garde* (1999), a history of The New York School of Poets. Lehman is the series editor of *The Best American Poetry*, and he is the editor of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (2006).

David Lehman's poetry takes tropes familiar from literary history and also from everyday life and puts wickedly witty spins on them. The reader of Lehman's poems is frequently aware of this poet's erudition, which extends to various compass points on what used to be referred to as the high-low spectrum. Lehman's prescient attention, in his poetry and prose, to forms as diverse as detective writing and popular song, seems especially timely.

Lehman's poems are filled with details that seem as though they come from the poet's own life and personal history, but whether or not they do they are always in service of a broader mission, that of Poetry, with a capital P. Many poets are "in love" with poetry—they'd have to be insane to live the lives they do and not to be—but few can muster the consistent awareness in their poetry of the fact that what they are writing belongs to a broadly-flowing river of other poetry.

Many of Lehman's titles are memorable in themselves. In "The Difference Between Pepsi and Coke," an early poem, one might assume he is thinking of his own father when he writes:
Sings Schubert in the shower; plays pinball in Paris;
 knows the new maid steals, and forgives her.

But then, one realizes the "Pop" referred to in the poem, as well as being a play on the sodas of the poem's title, does not have to refer to Lehman's own father, and could easily be someone else's, or be invented.

Even a seemingly simple title like "*Rejection Slip*" has a double meaning, so precise is Lehman's attention to language and intonation. There is history, as in the poem "*A Little*

History,” which begins, “Some people find out they are Jews.” There are senses of place and architecture, particularly urban, as in “The World Trade Center,” written in 1993. Of all the histories and stories in Lehman’s poems, the reader is left wondering and wanting to know, Was that real? Who was that about? For there is a dreamlike quality, too, to Lehman’s poetry that turns its words back on itself. As much as it seems to let the reader in, it also holds back, keeping something in reserve, something that belongs only to Poetry. Please join me in welcoming the mysterious, erudite, David Lehman.

Mary Jo Bang is a poet and teacher who lives and works in Saint Louis. She is the author of seven books of poems, including *Elegy* (2007), which won the National Book Critics Award in Poetry, *The Bride of E* (2009), and *The Last Two Seconds* (Graywolf Press, 2015). She has also published an acclaimed translation of Dante’s *Inferno*. She is a professor of English at Washington University in Saint Louis.

Many of the poems in Mary Jo Bang’s collection, *The Last Two Seconds*, began life either ekphrastically, or else as the result of some serious engagement with a work of literature, a dictionary, an article on contemporary art, a text on the brain, a pop song from 1983, an opera, a film. Read on their own, the notes, while fascinating, might not surprise some readers in their frames of reference. Reading the poems, however, is another story altogether. Bang so subsumes her sources that, not only would you be hard pressed to locate them without the notes, but their ideas and language have been totally transformed.

She has an exquisite ear, which enables her to hear into texts dear to her, such as Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. Here is a section from part 2 of “Let’s Say Yes,” composed, Bang informs us, of words from the novel:

Such things are merged. The cupboard outline
becomes soft. A table. Cigarette smoke.
A baby bright pink. Daring with being.

It reminds us how poetic that novel is, but it also starts to sound, in its parataxis, like that intensely visual poet, James Schuyler.

There is a consistent music to these poems, carefully nuanced, that rings true. In her poem “*Equidistant from the Center of Never*,” it is as if each of the 10 lines has a caesura. This is accentuated in the second and tenth lines, which both end with complete sentences: “A cat brushed by a leg.”, “Everything lasted a second.” Music’s intense awareness of time’s passing is palpable everywhere in these poems. Not levity, to be sure, but a certain roundedness is Bang’s gift to us, a heartfelt joy in the process of living, as that is manifested in poetry’s engagement with the world around it. Please join me in welcoming Mary Jo Bang.