

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Alan Bernheimer and Jean Day

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Dia:Chelsea
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Introduction by Vincent Katz

Alan Bernheimer is the author of the poetry collections *Cafe Isotope* (The Figures, 1980), *The Spoonlight Institute* (Adventures in Poetry, 2009), and *From Nature* (Cuneiform, 2019), among others. Recent work has appeared at *Across the Margin* and in *Delineator*, *Equalizer*, and *Hambone*. Born and raised in New York City, Bernheimer has lived in the Bay Area since the 1970s. His translation of Philippe Soupault's memoir, *Lost Profiles: Memoirs of Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism* was published by City Lights in 2016.

Alan Bernheimer has always liked to start in a normal zone and then proceed to manipulate normality in subtle ways, using a musical dexterity to arrive at poems that are harmonious in tone and suggestive in imagery.

His poem "Available Light" from his 1980 collection, *Café Isotope*, begins:

You are all your friends have in common
just as coffee brings civilization to its day

There are several shifts within the small space of those two lines. Bernheimer's poems gather density on repeated readings. A sense of humor, always apparent, is revealed to be a kind of glue keeping together a more serious project. That project is not somber though. Rather, it is an elevated attempt to write lines of a certain airiness, which, through time, suddenly grab each other in an adhesion that reifies in front of the reader's eyes, like a puzzle snapping into place.

In his most recent book, *From Nature*, published this year, Bernheimer focuses more on form. Many of the poems are in three-line or two-line stanzas. The accumulation is by shorter phrase, the effect more diffuse. It is almost as if the poet, confronted with the diffusion of time, is attempting to keep it together by means of form.

Here's a typical flow:
Words mean everything
Put skids under you
Waiting for emptiness

To fill with thought
Thought with words
Would be has been

There's an elegiac tone to some of these later poems, a softer look at what once made him smile. The smile is still there, but it's a melancholic smile. The intellect is the same that delighted then; it delights us now. Please welcome Alan Bernheimer.

Jean Day is an editor, a poet, and a union activist. Her books of poetry include *A Young Recruit* (Roof Books, 1988), *The Literal World* (atelos, 1998), *Enthusiasm Odes & Otium* (Adventures in Poetry, 2006), *Daydream* (Litmus Press, 2017), and *Triumph of Life* (Insurance Editions, 2018). Her work has also appeared in many anthologies, including the recent *Resist Much/Obey Little* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2017) and *Out of Everywhere 2: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (Reality Street, 2015). Day lives in Berkeley, where she works as managing editor of *Representations*, an interdisciplinary humanities journal published by University of California Press.

The last poem in Jean Day's book *Daydream* begins:

Back to the oak
rising like a mast
radically out of true
to scratch Orion's belt
in the do-
nothing days before school starts

There are many such moments of intense specificity in Day's poems, in which each line seems to shift, or sway, in a divergent direction, and yet, like the swaying of a ship, the whole maintains an affecting sanity. Here, we have an oak likened to a mast (an odd reversal). And somehow being "radically" out of true makes it true as well. Then, she typically deflates the whole situation, here by characterizing the last days of summer as "do-nothing days."

A number of her poems seem to reference past situations, but Day's strict avoidance of narrative keeps the reader focused on the present need, which keeps us focused on her sense of playfulness in language. Not infrequently, this playfulness is evinced by recourse to words from a language other than English.

In her more recent poems, collected in *The Triumph of Life*, Day adopts a more playful tone. Even the look of these mostly one-page poems — short lines in energetic jumps across the page — invites an excited response. Here's a passage from "Oh My Darling":
Our ships are captured.

Write me
the blow-by-blow.
Allegory's OK
just don't make me
fuck the captain.

Amazingly, from this point, in just a few lines, Day manages to land in a non-ironic, open-hearted place by the end of the poem. Her poetry does just that — it shifts and subverts your expectations, first one way, then another. You are left with a puzzled smile on your face, wanting more. And now you have more. Please welcome Jean Day.