

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Sarah Arvio and John Keene

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Dia:Chelsea
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Introduction by Vincent Katz

Sarah Arvio is the author of *Visits from the Seventh* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), *Sono: Cantos* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), and *night thoughts: 70 dream poems & notes from an analysis* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). In 2017, Knopf published her translations from the works of Federico García Lorca, entitled *Poet in Spain* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2017). Arvio worked for many years as a translator for the United Nations in New York and Switzerland, and she has taught poetry at Princeton University.

Sarah Arvio has long been interested in the potency of form, a kind of incantatory quality the poet uses to refract the world, almost as a filter, in an attempt to give shape to shapelessness, of which the most extreme iteration is that of death itself. She has channeled voices of the dead in her poems. She has tried to learn from them; to defend herself from them.

And yet, vivid glimpses of daily life are also present, as in this passage from her poem "Park Avenue":

The mirrored sides of skyscrapers do help,
despite eternal problems of dazzle:
seen from this side a grid of silver panes
phasing from pale to deep as day passes...

I am always interested in how she ties her titles, which are often one word, to her poems. There is a connection, but it can be oblique. Many of her poems are in three-line stanzas, and there is a sense that an overview, of the entire book, an entire life, may be taking precedence, that all those titles tie in together to form a parallel form of incantation.

Arvio's 2013 book, *night thoughts: 70 dream poems & notes* from an analysis again plays with form, in this case the sonnet form, as the poems are in fourteen-line stanzas. But Arvio is not interested in copying classical form. Instead, she uses repetition of phrases, often within a line, as a kind of mimesis of an earlier form of singing. The notes in this book make explicit what, in the poems themselves, remains something opaque and mysterious.

Federico García Lorca also wrote sonnets, and like Arvio, he was a lover of form. His poems took on many aspects, from the baroque to the local Andalusian traditions that were around him from his birth. In Arvio's translations of Lorca's Spanish poems, she gets at the clarity of his language, in which the simplest words suddenly take on the magnitude of a geomagnetic field. Her devotion to this transformation is palpable in her translations, as it is in her own poems. Please welcome Sarah Arvio.

John Keene is an artist, a translator, and a writer. His books include the experimental novel *Annotations* (New Directions, 1995), *Seismosis* (1913 Press, with drawings by Christopher Stackhouse, 2006), the story and novella collection *Counternarratives* (New Directions, 2015); the art book *GRIND* (Image Text Ithaca Press, a collaboration with photographer Nicholas Muellner, 2016), and the poetry chapbook *Playland* (Seven Kitchens Press, 2016). He has translated the Brazilian author Hilda Hilst's novel *Letters from a Seducer* (Nightboat Books, 2014), and numerous works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry from French, Portuguese, and Spanish. He chairs the African American and African studies department, and teaches English, African American studies, and creative writing at Rutgers University-Newark in New Jersey.

John Keene's texts play with the integrity of the text itself, as well as the integrity of genre. Is it poetry, is it text? What is text? Something woven? Something imagined? Is there such a thing as an autonomous creator? Reading or listening to John Keene's experimental texts allows us the freedom to ponder these questions, which in his hands always have a cultural and political aspect.

His text "Principles" goes from "The theory of prose" to the "The Theory of verse" — but how it gets there is mainly homophonic:

The theory of prose. The theory of pose. The theory of posse. The theory of Poes. The theory of peace. The theory of please. The theory of pleas...

In *Seismosis*, Keene seems to want to play with as many different variants of form as possible, from columns, to words spaced in steps along the page, to parenthetical refrains, to long quotations, to prose paragraphs, to lyric lines separated by a vertical dividing line. “Pictorial storms,” to quote a phrase from one, “less mathematical than lyrical,” to quote another.

One title is in the form of a question: “Self, black self, is there another label?” to which the following lines form variants or spurred thoughts. The last line is “In the end, refuse signature.” In a sense, that is what Keene does, moving from genre to genre, strategy to strategy, in a methodical effort to pose and attempt to answer such difficult questions.

In his translations of contemporary Brazilian poets, some of which he’ll be reading from tonight, Keene shows us that translation is very much a poetic practice, in the sense of finding something, a text, a miraculous kind of creation, and realizing that one can commit the intellectual effort to revealing that miracle in another form; that is a gift very much of a piece with the others in Keene’s varied experiments. Please join me in welcoming John Keene.

