

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Rodney Koeneke and Fred Moten

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Dia:Chelsea
535 West 22nd Street, 5th Floor
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Introduction by Vincent Katz

Rodney Koeneke is the author of the poetry collections *Rouge State* (Pavement Saw Press, 2003), *Musee Mechanique* (BlazeVOX, 2006), *Etruria* (Wave Books, 2014), and *Body & Glass* (Wave Books, 2018). His work has appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Fence*, *Granta*, *Harper's*, *Harriet*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *Zyzzyyva*, and elsewhere. An early member of the Flarf collective, he was active in the San Francisco Bay Area poetry scene until he moved in 2006 to Portland, Oregon, where he teaches in the history department at Portland State University.

On the back cover of Rodney Koeneke's first collection, *Rouge State*, there's a picture of Rodney playing the guitar and singing. It's a good image to keep in mind while listening to Rodney's poetry, for he is something of a modern-day troubadour. His persona is strongly felt in his poems, as is his desire, but it is also elusive, something for which the singer on his travels is endlessly searching. Take this example:

shut the fuck up, Grasshopper —

the stones are trying to sing.

from the upper-story windows of the subdivision

dawn exudes its rosiness...

(#40, *Rouge State*)

There's a fluid persona here, though. No macho singer he. Nor should we limit Rodney to any century or era. He's particularly at home in the ancient world, tossing off such gems as:

Bed down in the drowsy Mithraeum,

wake up a castrato in puce chiffon
 menial to the chief androgynous
who leads the sore members of his tribe
on long walks down the Aventine
 exposing horny emperors
dolloped up in natty drag.

(#29, *Rouge State*)

His next outing took him Flarfward, spawning one of my personal favorites, "My Cream," which refers partially to the band but then spirals out to include Blake, Yeats, and Pound, and chimps grunting in couplets.

And now, Rodney has hit a new stride, more classical one wants to call it. In different line-lengths and poem-lengths, he consistently finds a flow amid unpredictable syntax shifts and word choices (keep your dictionaries open, kids). Here's the beginning of "schottische" from *Body & Glass*:

You are old but
if possible I'd
like to keep

Moving, filling
the meter step
after step...

And he does, and will. Please welcome Rodney Koeneke.

Fred Moten is the author of the poetry collections *hughson's tavern* (leon works, 2008), *The Feel Trio* (Letter Machine Editions, 2014), *The Little Edges* (Wesleyan, 2015), and *The Service Porch* (Letter Machine Editions, 2016). His most recent work is the trilogy *consent not to be a single being*, published by Duke University Press. Moten and Stefano Harney are the authors of the forthcoming *All*

Incomplete. In 2018, Moten received the Roy Lichtenstein Award from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts and was named a United States Artists Writing Fellow. He teaches in the department of performance studies at New York University.

Some 500 years ago, Dante Alighieri wrote a treatise entitled *De vulgari eloquentia*. Allen Ginsberg was very fond of it. Its title might be translated “On eloquence in [or of] the vernacular”. Dante was trying to distinguish the official language, Latin, from languages people actually spoke — in Sicily and other parts of Italy. It occurs to me that Fred Moten’s poetry is very much in this tradition. What does it mean to grow up, learning in school and from other authorities and authoritarian figures the “right” way to speak and write, while all the time hearing — on the street, in music, pretty much anywhere outside of school — a very different kind of speaking and writing? And what if that other speaking and writing, in addition to being much more exciting, is connected to the cultural movements of one’s time, as opposed to a distant, preserved in formaldehyde, past?

This is the starting point. But hardly the end. Moten takes language and then playfully subverts it. In an early poem, “gramophone remember,” from *hughson’s tavern*, he pays exquisite attention to line breaks, often breaking words themselves, then finally fashioning new ones:

we anar

chist play air

egin to

Improvise.

“Ladenness” sits with “phonograppa” and “that same old place... / caliphonure”.

Then, there are the meditations, and also the anger, which is not necessarily the same as blame, as in the poem “jazz (as ken burns”, which begins, “fuck it if that’s what it is or you made it that...” There are endless recursions to music, and seemingly endless iterations of place, of various urban locales. Has he lived everywhere? Or has his poetry been able to invest its imagination to form a place large enough to give him x-ray vision to *know* what is going on on every street and every corner? “the history / of the city is also the history of the rent party.” (“bebop”, *hughson’s tavern*)

In later books, Moten got into a more flowing groove, one word after another with almost no breaks for breath. Then text starts to shape-shift, forming into visual diagrams and aesthetically pleasing contours. Again, it is hard to know what decade or locale you are in, but it doesn't matter. The continuity is mellifluous, whether Bessie or Cecil, and words start to have multiple meanings. The bottom, for example.

Or, as he puts it in "it's not that I want to say" from *The Service Porch*: "It's not that I want to say that poetry is disconnected from having / something to say; it's just that everything I want to say eludes me. But if I //caught it I wouldn't want it and you wouldn't want it either." Please welcome the indubitable Fred Moten!

