

Dia Art Foundation  
Readings in Contemporary Poetry  
Joel Lewis and Edwin Torres

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Dia:Chelsea  
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Introduction by Vincent Katz

**Joel Lewis** is the author of the following poetry collections: *House Rent Boogie* (Yellow Press, 1992), *Vertical's Currency* (Talisman House, 1999), *Learning from New Jersey* (Talisman House, 2007), *Surrender When Leaving Coach* (Hanging Loose Press, 2012), *North River Rundown* (Accent Editions, 2012), and most recently, *My Shaolin: A Poem of Staten Island* (Hanging Loose Press, 2016). He edited an anthology of contemporary New Jersey poets (*Bluestones and Salt Hay*, Rutgers University Press, 1990), as well as *On the Level Everyday* (Talisman House, 1997), the selected talks of Ted Berrigan. With his wife, Rutgers University cinema professor Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, he resides in Hoboken.

Joel Lewis will be recognized one day as an epic poet of daily life. He will be like Varro, about whom Quintilian wrote, "He composed a vast number of erudite works, and possessed an extraordinary knowledge of the Latin language, of all antiquity and of the history of Greece and Rome." Lewis's observations are trenchant, diligent, far-reaching, illuminated by research, and amazingly tap into details of the past without becoming either fetishistic or nostalgic. Here's a snippet from his poem "North Bergen," in *Learning from New Jersey*:

...Walking along  
Palisades Plaza searching for the latest  
issue of Rolling Stone. John Mayall  
forms another band. My primal  
environment was where the buses  
turned around. They beat him up  
because he preferred  
Rick Wakeman over  
Keith Emerson.

Again, like Varro, Lewis can be a satirist, but one always feels Lewis's takedowns of denizens he lived among or encounters are tempered by the warmth of human empathy. And it's not all teen gangs and mob lawyers. Lewis is one of our most sophisticated connoisseurs of jazz and other African American art forms, and figures like Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane play decisive roles in his verse. He is also knowledgeable about visual art and makes the following clarification:

Smithson gave me clues  
not Ginsberg  
    Williams  
    Springsteen  
    Bon Jovi  
        or  
    Baraka

(from "North Jersey Ashkenazic Anti-Szygy," *Learning from New Jersey*)

I haven't been able to define how Lewis's mastery of rhythms is disguised beneath the persona he sets up for himself - to use another apt analogy from antiquity, a kind of modern-day Herodotus, schooled no doubt by Charles Olson, to "find out by personal inquiry."

His latest book, *My Shaolin: A Poem of Staten Island*, takes that borough, lacking in respect by those who do not live there, and gives it the full Lewis. As a result, we are gratified, coming away with a fuller knowledge of how "they" see "us," and additional tidbits, such as the names of the bomb-sniffing dogs, and a running series of Staten Islandisms. If you pay attention, you will also learn the etymology of "skeeve." When was the last time you learned so much so enjoyably? Prepare to be delighted and enlightened. Please welcome Joel Lewis to Dia.

**Edwin Torres** was born in New York City. He came to poetry through performance art in the East Village in the early 1990s. His books include *The All-Union Day of the Shock Worker* (Roof Books, 2004), *The PoPedology of an Ambient Language* (Atelos, 2007), *Yes Thing No Thing* (Roof Books, 2010), *In the Function of External Circumstances* (Nightboat Books, 2010), and *Ameriscopica* (University of Arizona Press, 2014). In 2017, Torres will serve as a fellow in the Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a member of the electro-lingo band Sowndhaus, and lives in Beacon, New York, with his wife and son.

Edwin Torres takes a global, or perhaps universal, at least galactic, view of poetry. And not just a view, he jumps in, feet or head first, depending on the situation, with intense dedication to the visual, aural, performative, anthropophagic, and modernist presentations in his work.

A poem from his 2004 collection begins:

may I matter—and dislike  
the everyway—of am  
may I make a matter—into  
everyway I am—may I  
like this—and want  
to figure out—this roll

I am fired by  
(from "This is the Glass Unlit by a Dolphin to my Side," in *The All-Union Day of the Shock Worker*)

Here language stammers into existence, finds its way, and Torres seemingly proceeds like this, in different takes, throughout his diverse corpus. Some pages are dazzling futurist or dada word collages that have long dispensed with the Cartesian niceties of normal design. But on other pages, poems lie meekly, skinnily waiting for understanding from the rapidly passing urban dweller.

All of Torres' work shows an awareness of speed, a sense of humor, and the relevance of lineage, in its successful vaulting across, and under, the modern urban skyway.

Cameo cloud  
broached against  
the neck of the world

Tower of milk  
smoke against  
the universe

(from "Vacant Speed," in *The PoPedology of an Ambient Language*)

Prepare for the evanescent exciting wallop of his permanent present. Please welcome Edwin Torres.