

Dia Art Foundation  
Readings in Contemporary Poetry  
Eleni Sikelianos and Will Alexander

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Dia:Chelsea  
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Introduction by Vincent Katz

**Eleni Sikelianos** is the author of ten books of poetry, including *The Monster Lives of Boys and Girls* (Green Integer, 2003, National Poetry Series), *The Book of Jon* (City Lights, 2004), *The California Poem* (Coffee House, 2004), *The Loving Detail of the Living & the Dead* (Coffee House Press, 2013), *You Animal Machine* (Coffee House, 2014), and most recently *Make Yourself Happy* (Coffee House, 2017). Sikelianos has taught poetry in public schools, homeless shelters, and prisons, and is part of the guest faculty at the Naropa University Summer Writing Program in Boulder, Colorado. She currently teaches at the University of Denver, where she founded and runs the Writers in the Schools program.

Eleni Sikelianos is a hybrid visionary, down home, astral, rooted in the problems of her day, but she always makes time for the good things in life — prime among them family and community. She is cultured in an almost old-world way; she values the languages and traits that have been handed down through centuries.

*Make Yourself Happy* is more of a challenge than a prescription. In addition to resistance, which has become as basic as breathing to a much wider swath than previously, we need to be able to think beyond, Sikelianos seems to say in these poems. In this, as often, she stretches her Greek roots back from recent times to the ancients, remembering Socrates' statement that "the unexamined life is not worth living" and the Pre-Socratics, who wrote poems about elemental forces, such as Strife and Calm, alternating in the universe.

In the first part of the book, she wanders, lets her mind wander, in search of charms for, experiences of, happiness. Memory enters, and exits. This is not a book of memory, but rather of the moment, its fleetingness. There is history, but this too passes quickly. "Civilization would / make herself / happy if she could," she writes. The "she" is civilization, but also the poet, though she is also "I": "To build a bolder, better Face / book, I try to hit it / with my voice." In another poem, "It / is how to live."

The second section of the book is an excursus on extinct animals that delights in its detail, candor, and impromptu profundity, from Steller's Sea Cow (*Hydrodamalis Gigas*) to the Bubal Hartebeest (*Alcelaphus Buselaphus Buselaphus*). I am fascinated by these histories and

myths and also by the informal way Sikelianos fashions them. One short poem, at the being of the section called “Oracle or, Utopia”, reads in its entirety:

No one knows how it began.  
A few atoms lying in the sun  
began to lick and burn.  
Then, man.

You need to know, and here to tell you — accompanied by the saxophone of Devin Waldman — Eleni Sikelianos! Please welcome them to Dia.

**Will Alexander** is a poet, novelist, essayist, philosopher, aphorist, playwright, visual artist, and pianist. He is the author of thirty collections of writing, including *Asia & Haiti* (Sun & Moon, 1995), *Exobiology as Goddess* (Manifest Press, 2005), *The Sri Lankan Loxodrome* (New Directions, 2009), *Impulse & Nothingness* (Green Integer, 2011), and *Compression & Purity* (City Lights, 2011). He has a book forthcoming from New Directions called *Across the Vapour Gulf*. He lives in Los Angeles.

“Compression” is an operative word in Will Alexander’s poetry. It appears in the title of a recent volume and in several poems therein, accompanied by related forms and ideas. Alexander’s viewpoint is in terms of eons, and everything within it is fluid. In a biographical text in *Compression & Purity*, he writes about an early vision that “confirmed for me the activity of the supra-physical world which has remained with me in all my subsequent moments...” Discovery of the music of Eric Dolphy and John Coltrane fostered this attitude: “It made me feel that I had allies, that there were others who knew that the material world was completely permeable, and that none of the rationally stated boundaries could contain the imaginal.” From music to poetry was a natural leap. Rimbaud was the first bridge, leading to many others, touchstones for Alexander until today, including Artaud, Césaire, Breton, Lamantia, and Bob Kaufman.

From these, and from his wide-ranging scientific, historical, and literary research, Alexander composes his poems, writing automatically. His lines feel as if they have arrived naturally on the page, they have the visual appearance of natural phenomena. There is a porousness of sound and idea, through which the persona sometimes is woven, sometimes not. “Water on New Mars” is entirely in quotes, implying that someone or some thing — the planet or the god? — is speaking:

New Mars  
a smaller or faultless deafness  
alive  
through ghostly silhouette  
through kinetic margin as dissension

I exist as its rigour  
not quite riddle  
not quite seismic  
being gnostic

The idea of what happens under pressure — diamonds are created, what else? — is the subject of the title poem of *Compression & Purity*, but it is almost a through-line for all of Alexander's work. He is able to view the universe — its mysteries, its knowable and unknowable elements — with a sanguine air that is uplifting and freeing. He is a true believer in and defender of the unimpeachability of art. Please welcome Will Alexander to Dia.