

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Christopher Stackhouse and Patricia Spears Jones

Tuesday, November 1, 2016

Dia:Chelsea
535 West 22nd Street, 5th Floor
New York City

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Christopher Stackhouse is a critic, poet, and teacher based in New York. He is co-author of *Seismosis* (1913 Press, 2006), which features line drawings by Stackhouse with text by writer and translator John Keene. His most recent volume of poems, *Plural*, was published by Counterpath Press in 2012, and he is the author of the chapbook *Slip* (Corollary Press, 2005). Stackhouse's poems, essays, interviews, and reviews have been published in literary journals and arts periodicals, including *Modern Painters*, *Art in America*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*. His writing has also appeared in the journals *EOAGH*, *Octopus Magazine*, *Aufgabe*, *Hambone*, *The Volta*, *Reverie: Midwest African American Literature*, *American Poet*, and *MAKE: A Literary Magazine*. Stackhouse is a contributing editor at FENCE and BOMB magazines.

Formal concerns mark Christopher Stackhouse's engagement with the art of poetry. One of his most signal achievements formally is a densely-packed poem in eight longish lines. Like sculptures, these poems lie there, on the floor, as it were, full of condensed energy and also indestructible. It was Basil Bunting who reminded Ezra Pound, by "fumbling about with a German-Italian dictionary," in Pound's words, that *dichten = condensare*. In other words, one of poetry's jobs is do away with the unnecessary, to condense.

Oftentimes, the foliage is so dense, the best approach is to let it waft over you, and feel the shifts, where they hit you. The poems can be parsed, at leisure, but their compactness assures that any one parsing will never be definitive. When I read the lines, "Feeling is pavement, thought seems some register above it, a black ocean, / Smart leagues of comfort, how it is, the girls love the girls, the boys the boys—" in Stackhouse's poem "Convention," the first image I get is of a neighborhood in which white faces are minimal to non-existent, the comfortable feeling there. And the first image of love is erotic. On a second read, though, the "black ocean" becomes the sky, and thought is up there, not down on the pavement, and the love is the love of friendship. As meanings shift in Stackhouse's poems, stability, such as it is, is found in the shifting, and also in the dedication — to poetry, and also to people, and to life.

There are a lot of different forms in Stackhouse's book, *Plural*. Hence the title. Tonight, I present you the multiform Christopher Stackhouse. Please give him a warm welcome.

“Arkansas born and raised; resident of New York City for more than four decades,” as it says on her website, Patricia Spears Jones is a poet, playwright, and literary curator who lives and works in New York. She is the author of the poetry collections *The Weather That Kills* (Coffee House Press, 1995), *Femme du Monde* (Tia Chucha Press, 2006), *Painkiller* (Tia Chucha Press, 2010), five chapbooks including *Living in the Love Economy* (Overpass Books, 2014), and two plays commissioned and produced by Mabou Mines. Her fourth poetry collection: *A Lucent Fire: New and Selected Poems* is out from White Pine Press (White Pine Press Distinguished Poets series) and features her 2016 Pushcart Prize winning poem, “Etta James at the Audubon Ballroom.” She is a contributing editor at BOMB magazine and a fellow emeritus at the Black Earth Institute, Wisconsin. She is the editor of “The Future Differently Imagined”, an issue of *About Place Journal*, the online publication of Black Earth Institute, and was editor and contributor to the blog project: *Thirty Days Hath September: Another Kind of Noise* (blackearthinstitute.org) (2012, 2016); *Think: Poems for Aretha Franklin's Inauguration Day Hat* (bombsite.org) (2009); and co-editor of the long out of print, ground-breaking anthology *Ordinary Women: An Anthology of Poetry by New York City Women* (1978). She also published W.B.#1, a mimeo magazine that included works by Lee Breuer, Robin Messing, Larry Eigner, Bill Kushner, Levi Frazier, Jr. and Ted Greenwald in 1975.

In a poem beginning with a line by Neruda, Patricia Spears Jones compares sugar and salt, both white, and concludes they cannot build a tower. Salt and pepper, however, can: “Salt and pepper are masons / building / the perfect blank”. What they build is mysterious and yet crystal clear: “White on white walls thick — whole cities surrounded with / lustrous black roadways.” The black is lustrous, but it is outside, surrounding the white walls of the cities. But the black forms roadways, paths of communication, while the white is dedicated to barriers, protections, separations. Jones’ poetry often works like this — quietly, gently, with a careful attention to placement and sound.

Elsewhere, Jones can be more freewheeling, even raucously narrative, as in “Encounter and Farewell,” a poem from her most recent collection. “It’s all foreplay, really - this walk...” and she goes on to describe in loving detail an ode to New Orleans’ French Quarter. You wonder, Foreplay to what? The term seems somehow metaphorical. No, it turns out it’s foreplay for real, as the poem shifts into lust, with tips from Professor Longhair, until finally, boom, she and her unnamed companion are doing it, and that has its own several levels of epiphanies. There’s no sentimentality here, or anywhere in Jones’ poetry, but there is recognition of the passing of time, and people. And there are inserted, as here, odes to women, black women, acknowledgement of the direness of fate that music can alleviate: “their voices sweeten the snaking air”.

Jones takes her particular poetic intelligence on a variety of rides — to Paris, the West, and to the secluded reaches of the heart, which she makes apparent. “Sadness is so private,” she writes. “But I won’t become invisible.” Tonight, she is visible and audible, and we are the beneficiaries. Please welcome Patricia Spears Jones to Dia.