

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Ann Stephenson and Carter Ratcliff

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Dia:Chelsea
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Introduction by Vincent Katz

Ann Stephenson's publications include *Wirework*, *Adventure Club*, and *The Poles* (forthcoming). Her poems have appeared in *Across the Margin*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Delineator*, *Ladowich*, *Recluse*, and *Sal Mimeo*, as well as in the anthology *Like Musical Instruments: 83 Contemporary American Poets* (2014), edited by Larry Fagin. She lives and works in New York City.

Ann Stephenson's poetry is exciting in its refusal to submit to synopsis. She modulates textural sophistication and formal acuity with delicately handled insouciance in care of expression that borders on the ecumenical. I mean, she could be saving the world with her poetry. But you wouldn't know that from her poems. They don't emblazon slogans on their desire, but rather let it sink in surreptitiously, over time.

I think it's because her poems aren't literal. They are about her in the sense that her consciousness permeates every line, and the reader/listener feels they are being given intimate access to someone's interior experience, as for instance in her poem, "Performance," which announces upfront its performativity of a self. Only, Stephenson isn't making any of it up, it's all for real:

Now that we continue lying in bed
I return to thinking with my skin
I begin to appreciate the extra air
After mourning bullet holes for so long
They made me what I am today
Despite the loss of pinkness
Touching feels good

What I like most about Stephenson's poems is that each line opens up: it is connected to the lines before and after, but it asserts its ability to connect differently, not only to them, but to an infinite array of others, some of which trigger in the minds of her readers/listeners.

In her most recent collection, she continues this methodical plotting of the truth of line after line:

Meaning I suppose
Could be my sea wall
Like a belief in trouble
I'll explain the tide
Tomorrow on the beach
(from "Sea Wall")

Her perseverance ensures we will be guided to many fascinating places for a long time to come. Please help me welcome Ann Stephenson to Dia.

Carter Ratcliff's books of poetry include *Fever Coast* (Kulchur Foundation, 1973), *Give Me Tomorrow* (Vehicle Editions, 1983), and *Arrivederci, Modernismo* (Libellum books, 2007). His poetry has appeared in such journals as *The World*, *Baffler*, *Cimarron Review*, *La Presa*, *Sienese Shredder*, and *Vanitas*. His novel, *Tequila Mockingbird*, was published in 2015 by Station Hill Press. He is the author of several books as an art critic, including *The Fate of a Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Postwar American Art* (1996) and *Out of the Box: The Reinvention of Art, 1965–1975* (2000); he has contributed to monographs on Andy Warhol, Gilbert & George, and Nabil Nahas, among others.

Carter Ratcliff's poetry is hard to define. Schooled in the murky syntactical byways mapped out by John Ashbery, possessed of the skill and grace of other New York School avatars, Ratcliff charts his own course. I am sure there are classical models in there as well — I hear some faint echoes of Horace, for instance — but he has worked hard to keep his language contemporary, his syntax individual.

Another element of Ratcliff's poetic persona was formed in the 1960s and '70s, around the Poetry Project in New York. There, the premium was on a language that was generational, and Ratcliff participates in that as well. What sets him apart are his frames of reference and his attitude towards the poem. "I understand poetry as dramatic monologue," he has written. "The poet imagines a person and speaks — or writes — in that person's voice." His recent poems often take on topics, as in "American This, American That," which contains these lines:

...American odds

and American ends, American odes
and American endings, American acting,
which isn't really acting or really isn't acting...

Ratcliff's 1973 publication, *Fever Coast*, published by Lita Hornick's Kulchur Foundation, is an amazing book. It is epic in its restraint, and I guess that is a defining feature of Ratcliff's poetry. Here is a quote from his poem "The Search" from that collection:

Tomorrow means nothing, it's true
but meaninglessness must still be embodied somehow, in something

that meant something to someone, a lost puppy,
even a puppy I never noticed,
so entrancing was the surf I no longer had to enter,
so bright and at the same time leaden were the waves,
the foam splashing, but not splashing me.

Foaming occurs more frequently in Ratcliff's poetry than anyone else's. Partly, I think this is a reference to the idea that beauty can be born out of nothing, or of pure desire, but also because "to foam" is an idea in itself, akin to the senses of: to bloom, to be in one's prime, to ferment, to be eminent, to abound in, to swarm with... Carter Ratcliff's poetry does and is all of those things. Please join me in welcoming him to Dia.