

Dia Art Foundation

Ann Lauterbach and Paul Foster Johnson

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, February 17, 2011, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Paul Foster Johnson

Paul Foster Johnson was born in 1976 in Englewood, NJ. He got his BA in English from SUNY Geneseo and his MFA in Creative Writing from Brown University. His first collection of poetry, *Refrains/Unworkings*, was published by Apostrophe Books in 2008, and his second, *Study in Pavilions and Safe Rooms*, has just come out from Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs. With E. Tracy Grinnell, he is the author of the g-o-n-g press chapbook *Quadriga*. His poems have appeared in *The Awl*, *Jacket*, *Cannot Exist*, *GAM*, *EOAGH*, *Fence*, and *Octopus*. From 2003 to 2006, he curated the Experiments and Disorders reading series at Dixon Place. He is an editor at Litmus Press and lives in New York. Starting this Fall, he will be the editor of *The Poetry Project Newsletter*.

"It began and ended in a taxi, but in between / was the restless and gradual movement of spirit," writes Paul Foster Johnson in his poem "Rythmicon," the long poem that begins his first collection. Emblematic of his vision, and of his journey so far as a poet, these lines contain a muted reference to an event, a commonplace detail from daily life, and what can serve as a description of Johnson's own progression. His terse, densely-worded lines exhibit a restless. They are not easily ingratiating, but rather, with occasional flashes of wry humor, give evidence of a mind grappling with the world through the mechanisms of line in a voice very much his own. This linear progression can seem gradual, in that it moves in steps, or series, not by wild leaps of inventive fancy. On the other hand, while not often referential, his lines do contain messages, possibly coded, that ring very clearly, as in these lines, also from "Rhythmicon": "Unable to parlay analogies into a living document / we sent instead drunken messages as in the general / agreement on the substance of gay hell." In the long poem "Clone Memoir," Johnson conjures a community by repetition of the pronoun "we." A sometimes ominous tone hovers, a political subtext, within which "we were pelted, subject to distress," or "we were fawns, prey / to the deformation of a theory." Could the dilemma be academic, that is to say, intellectual? Musical terms abound in his book *Refrains/Unworkings*: subdominant, suspension, rock opera, stump fiddle.

Johnson's new book is structured not by division into sections, as is commonly the case, but by an interspersing of "rooms." Several of his poems have the word "room" in their titles: "Gaylord Texan Panic Room," "Bowery Safe Room," "Enya's Panic Room," "Storm Safe Room," "Chat Room," "Bronx Safe Room," etc. His new poems, these particular spaces, are more finely chiseled, and at times more lyrical, and they carry to a new level his verbal investigations of the difficulties of living in this present moment. Please welcome Paul Foster Johnson to Dia.

Ann Lauterbach

Ann Lauterbach was born and grew up in Manhattan, where she studied at The High School of Music and Art. She graduated from the University of Wisconsin (Madison) with a B.A. in English and did graduate work at Columbia University. She moved to London, living there for seven years. As the Director of the Literature Program at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, she invited John Ashbery to read there in 1971, a formative experience, for London and for Lauterbach, about which she has written and spoken. She returned to New York in 1974, working in art galleries and then teaching full time, in the writing programs at Columbia, Princeton, Iowa, and CCNY and the Graduate Center of CUNY. She is the author of eight books of poetry including *Or to Begin Again* (Penguin, 2009), which was nominated for the National Book Award, *Hum* (2005), *If in Time: Selected Poems 1975-2000* (2001), *On a Stair* (1997), *And for Example* (1994), *Clamor* (1991), *Before Recollection* (1987), and *Many Times, but Then* (1979), as well as a book of essays, *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience* (1994). Her collaborations with visual artists include *Thripsis* with Joe Brainard (1998), *A Clown, Some Colors, A Doll, Her Stories, A Song, A Moonlit Cove*, with Ellen Phelan (1996), and *How Things Bear Their Telling*, with Lucio Pozzi (1990). She is the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the New York State Foundation for the Arts, the Ingram Merrill Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation. She is the Ruth and David E. Schwab Professor of Language and Literature and co-chair of Writing at the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College, and visiting core critic at the Yale University School of Art. She lives in Germantown, New York.

I used to think of Ann Lauterbach as an aleatory poet, but now I think of her as a poet of the earth. Reading her early poems, one has the uncanny impression that every word is *grounded* in some particular experience, which is not stated, but swiftly evinced, in tones that are almost conversational, or could be conversational, if one were lucky enough to find oneself in the presence of a most musical and allusive conversationalist. Although composed of sentences, her early poems never seem literal: “The bloom, stranded somehow in a glass and a view / of marvelous, slow-moving things / nameless because I had run out of names,” she writes in “Then Suddenly.”

By the time of her book *Clamor*, published in 1991, her lines began to break up, at first into two-line stanzas, as in the poem “Prom In Toledo Night,” with its epigraph by Michael Palmer. This emphasis on breaks caused her poetry to have more unexpected pauses, probably the moment I am thinking of when I think of Lauterbach as an aleatory poet. “Prom In Toledo Night” begins “A new heat comes up on a grand scale. / Were we waiting for it, as for a link, //ask about sugar? Well, the heat is / here. I thought I would speak of it // for someone to adjust the antenna, to //the recent suburban content, how much / sky is now blocked.” And it continues, its music breaking but not stopping until it ends.

Still later, words began being strung across the page, flying, or at least released from their lineal moorings, and by implication, more released from their subtexts, which yet remain present.

In a review of her most recent collection for *Jacket* magazine, I wrote: [Lauterbach’s poem] “Ants In the Sugar (Blanchot/Mallarmé)” starts out obediently on the left margin but soon begins shooting out the right, breaking rank, in outbursts such as, “Quickening, surrender,” “phantom aptitude,” “coming farther out,” “leans asking,” “Who has bagged the plot,” “who nags,” “as if it were a wall of light,” etc. This is actually a productive way to begin reading Lauterbach. Of course, we want to graduate to reading her line by line, as then we will be in a position to appreciate the ultimate — and casual — mastery that makes her poetry purr. In the second section of “Ants In The Sugar,” space is blown wide open. Lauterbach has learned from Olson, as she herself points out, and has an ability, unusual these days, to charge every area of the page of spread. In Lauterbach’s “spread out” poems, Mallarmé returns — the Mallarmé of *Un coup de des jamais abolira le hazard*. We finally get:

we
are
we
we
wear
war
echo

A vicious circle of the most delectable kind. I realized these words in Lauterbach’s poems work differently from words in most other poems. Their particular positions on pages are pitched, tilted, towards each other. She has a very acute visual sense of the words to the page.

Ann Lauterbach’s most recent book of poems, *Or To Begin Again*, seems about to complete a sentence when combined two earlier titles of hers: *Many Times, But Then* and *And for Example*. Each reader of Lauterbach may make up her/his versions, or different versions on different occasions, but there is always the temptation, more, the necessity, to fill the tantalizing blanks left in these titles. As with all good titles, these epitomize the texts found between their covers. The experience of reading these titles is, fractal-like, the same (or very similar to) reading the poems they stand for. The titles clearly work by elision. They open up fields that are not present for the reader but which are nevertheless enticing.”

What kind of reader or listener does Ann Lauterbach’s poetry call out for? One who is attuned to music, who has time, and who is able to continue the conversation at the finely tuned pitch she has established for it. For that listener, endless pleasures are in store. Please welcome Ann Lauterbach back to Dia.