

Dia Art Foundation

Anselm Berrigan and John Godfrey

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

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Introduction by Vincent Katz

Anselm Berrigan

Anselm Berrigan was born on August 14, 1972 in Chicago, where his parents, Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley, were living. Anselm is the author of several books of poetry, including *Free Cell* (City Lights Spotlight, 2009) and the just-published book-length poem *Notes from Irrelevance* (Wave, 2011). From 2003 to 2007, he was Artistic Director of The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. He currently teaches at Pratt Institute and Wesleyan University and co-chairs Writing at the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts. He is the poetry editor for *The Brooklyn Rail*.

Reading Anselm Berrigan's poetry gives one the feeling of being swept along by a current, in whose waves and ripples the reader is comfortably conveyed. Comfortable, because your guide has taken care to make your trip a lively one, entertaining, verbally playful, emotionally intense, seemingly revealing of the poet who wrote these poems — but how much, after all, do we know about Anselm?

The I in these poems is well-versed in the New York School gambit of the fluctuating narrator. You could say it's in his DNA. In a poem entitled "Not all there," dedicated to Alice Notley, from his first book, the poet wanders around the subject, the way O'Hara wandered around midtown, before *revealing* that he saw a *New York Post* with her face on it. Anselm in this poem wanders from Buffalo to New York to San Francisco to Paris. Then, gearing up for the knockout punch, he reveals the occasion of the poem: "Actually I haven't said anything since I spoke to Alice on Friday & said / Happy Birthday! / Fifty-fucking-one! / What kind of present would you like?"

Allen Ginsberg is referred to in this same poem, along with many other friends, and Anselm seemed to have taken to heart, right from the start, the Beat credo that no thought should be edited out. Or, as Frank O'Hara put it, according to Kenneth Koch, the silliest idea actually in his head was worth more than the most profound idea in someone else's. Ginsberg believed that "sore thumb" moments — those revealing thoughts and facts we often try to hide or smooth over — are precisely what give a work of art its human value and communicative power. Anselm's poetry is full of sore-thumb moments, but the technical skill he brings to bear on such thoughts makes them not only comprehensible but coherent.

Anselm's second book featured a long poem, "Zero Star Hotel," in memory of poet Douglas Oliver, and it is more and more, with variations, into this scale that his poetry has developed: visually provocative formal works that incorporate an established willingness and desire for unfettered expression, moved forward by an ever-stronger connection to the poem's inner pulse.

2009's *Free Cell*, features two examples of the Anselm Berrigan long-style poem. (They are not yet long enough to be called mock-epic, but that may be in the offing). In "Have A Good one," he writes: "It's been good to/celebrate impure/origins. I'll pros-/titute this ability/to celebrate for/awhile longer/I like to think." 27 pages later, in the same poem, we read: "Let us celebrate death/with a magnificence/worthy of the reader."

Although he attempts to throw us off with "prostitute," I'd wager that's a pretty good start to an Anselmian poetics. The poem isn't *about* anything, though there is an inkling at the end that it is considering life — a newly born life — as an antidote to death. Probably Anselm's poems are at their most hidden when they seem most revealing, and vice versa. I'm not going waste any time trying to tease biography from these works. I'm here to enjoying *listening* to the flux of Anselm's ear and voice — and so are you! Please welcome Anselm Berrigan to Dia.

John Godfrey

John Godfrey was born in Massena, New York, on July 11, 1945. He graduated from Princeton in 1967 and was first published that

year in *Mother 8*. Godfrey's first major collection, *Dabble: Poems 1966-1980*, came out in 1982 from Full Court Press. He has published five collections since, including *Private Lemonade* (Adventures In Poetry, 2003) and *City of Corners* (Wave Books, 2008).

Ron Padgett has written about John Godfrey that he is "both a lyrical and metaphysical poet whose natural sense of form and disarming elegance are reminiscent of Herrick and Donne..." Michael Lally, in a review in *The Village Voice*, referred to Godfrey's "brilliant blend of lyric vulnerability and hard-edged precision..." while Clark Coolidge wrote, "In a time when most poems seem overlit as sit-coms, John Godfrey stirs up the necessary darkness." Clearly, Godfrey is a poet's poet, in the best sense of that term, and a list of his publishers — Padgett, Anne Waldman, Larry Fagin, Kenward Elmslie, Geoffrey Young — makes clear the high regard in which Godfrey is held in these circles.

That Godfrey's name is not so well known outside of the poetry world may be due to another element of his poetry, one that keeps it on this side of modern art — his reluctance to spell things out, his aversion to narrative. His poems are full of hints of narratives; fragments, details, of New York stories are glimpsed, scented, but the poet rarely allows himself, or the reader, the comfort of settling in for a coherent tale. Instead, one is kept slightly off-balance, as if in a dance with the poet, who is always leading, the reader or listener following, until the music comes to an end.

What keeps the game going is Godfrey's unerring ear for that music, for the precise tense and mood of verb, for speech as sound. Whatever its source, the language is processed through Godfrey's delicate instrument of taste. Some of the language might be overheard, but mainly we are treated the interior monologue of a suave, debonair, street-smart man-about-town.

In an early poem, "Love Peon," Godfrey does a modern take on John Donne:

I would be a speck on her tongue, an invisible moistness
high on her thigh, a charged humidity of fur!
I would disappear for her, I would murder her and

carry her stiff on my shoulder through flaming tenements!
We must touch nipples and fold our hairs together
and the twisted coathangers in my chest will strengthen

rather than drill my heart—I come into my hand
and pour it into my mouth, which I imagine is hers!

Godfrey is excellent at pinning a street scene, à la Lou Reed circa "Waiting For My Man" meets Frank O'Hara circa "A Step Away From Them" as in Godfrey's poem "The Avenue And The United States" from his 1988 book *Midnight On Your Left*:

Wednesday night's
single bell of morning
Pure of kids from the 'burbs
loungers chic about
the bar door corner
German glossy slut for pose
sprawled dark glasses
straight nose
articulates some mastered humor
literacy a vulnerable cheek
added to her allure

In his most recent poems, Godfrey has gotten even more condensed, more elliptical. It's all still there, the New York sky, the heat and humidity, the denizens he encounters and notices, particularly female, particularly dark-skinned, though he (the I of the poems) seems to deal, too, with the dudes. But it is the romance of encounter, the incompleteness of it, but also the roundedness, outside light countered by inside shadow, where lust is played against music whose rhythm, though translated, is always appropriate, and whose colors gleam through the darkness. Please welcome John Godfrey to Dia.