

Dia Art Foundation

# Bill Berkson and Matt Longabucco

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Tuesday, February 17, 2015, 6:30 pm

## Introduction by Vincent Katz

**Matt Longabucco** is the author of the chapbook *Everybody Suffers: The Selected Poems of Juan García Madero* (O’Clock Press, 2014). Other work has recently appeared in *Capricious*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *Parkett*. He is also a cofounder of Wendy’s Subway, a twenty-four-hour library, workspace, and meeting place for writers, artists, and readers in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. He teaches at New York University and lives in Brooklyn.

Matt Longabucco mixes Elizabethan syntax with an ultra-current sensibility. He builds on the source, gathering energy and propulsive force. In “In The Eight,” he writes:

*Time I filled so faithfully at the desk  
or paying visits, guilt I endured like  
a soldier but in what army, hope  
I put into words not exactly, lust I divided  
like a bud of weed—leaf from stem—  
(from “In The Eight”)*

It keeps going, that’s his gift, to push the poem along on one single breath, seemingly; to quote is necessarily to extract.

Elsewhere, he is able to analyze succinctly what it feels like to be in a random contemporary space, flung skyward by ether:

*The most important things I say I say in texts sent, as so many are, at no special time, on what feels like a whim.* (from “Delayed Spring”)

In a long recent poem called “The Misfits,” Longabucco writes: “I still want to write the poetry of street and / bedroom, drink and cigarette, vampire / and morgue.” I can’t say about the last two, but he’s definitely got the first four sussed. To experience his top-flight energy and wit, please welcome Matt Longabucco to Dia.

**Bill Berkson** was born in New York in 1939. He moved to Northern California in 1970 and now divides his time between San Francisco and New York. He is a poet, critic, curator, and professor emeritus at the San Francisco Art Institute, where he taught art history and literature for many years. He has been a corresponding editor for *Art in America* since 1988 and has contributed to the journals *Artcritical*, *Artforum*, *Aperture*, and *Modern Painters*. His recent books include: *Snippets* (Omerta, 2014); *For the Ordinary Artist*, a collection of his art writings (BlazeVox, 2011); *Not an Exit* with drawings by Léonie Guyer (Junge Garden Books, 2011); *Repeat After Me* with watercolors by John Zurier (Gallery Paule Anglim, 2011); *Lady Air* (Perdika, 2010); *Portrait and Dream: New & Selected Poems* (Coffee House Press, 2009); and *BILL* with drawings by Colter Jacobsen (Gallery 16 Editions, 2008). Coffee House Press published a new collection of his poems, *Expect Delays*, in November 2014.

Bill Berkson’s poetry has the air of a parlour game, or of high-end repartee. In case some may have forgotten, an article states, “Parlour games competed for attention with the mass media, particularly radio, movies, and television . . . Many parlour games involve logic or word-play. Others are more physical games, but not to the extent of a sport or exercise. Some also involve dramatic skill, such as in charades. Most do not require any equipment beyond what would be available in a typical parlour. Parlour games are usually competitive, but cumulative scores are not usually kept. The length and ending time of the game is typically not set; play continues until the players decide to end the game.” In other words, an attempt is made, in Berkson’s poetry, to use one’s wits to test the limits of language’s expressive quality, to express the social good manners of entertaining one’s audience, to think on one’s feet, and to provide an alternative to the relentless dumbing-down our culture, and perhaps all culture, is falling into.

Among Berkson’s many achievements, as poet, editor, publisher, critic, and teacher, one of the most signal was his ability to mark out his own territory from the get-go. One can imagine it might have been difficult, in the bright light of the New York School’s heroes, with whom Berkson was fast since his early days as a writer, not to be overly-influenced by their genius. Instead, Berkson took whatever lessons he learned and struck out on his own into the terrain of poetry. Presumably, he was impressed as much by his mentors’

insistence on finding one's own path as by their specific phraseology, and he knew enough to avoid the pitfalls.

This classic apprenticeship paid off, and Berkson's poetry took a new turn into contemporary language via the actions, poetic and otherwise, of the 1960s.

Berkson's publications, from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s — *Shining Leaves* (Angel Hair Books, 1969), *Recent Visitors* (Angel Hair Books, 1973), *Enigma Variations* (Big Sky, 1975), *Saturday Night: Poems 1960-61* (Sand Dollar, 1975), *Blue Is The Hero: Poems 1960-1975* (L Publications, 1976), *Lush Life* (Z Press, 1984) — “brought into one's consciousness,” as I have written elsewhere, “an awareness of [his] poetry as an ever-overlapping opening-up of a poetics, based in the rolling waves of New York School's surf, yet mellowing out on the mesa of the poets' colony of Bolinas, California, recovering, as it were, from the clamor and degradations of the big city's cutthroat modus operandi, discovering a more open daily expanse . . . For this reader, the most powerful of Berkson's poetry occurs when he's found a way to boil down the experimental into a *connection* — usually with a person, sometimes to a memory or present observation.”

In his most recent poetry, Berkson keeps stripping down, the emotion more apparent, but always alive with the knowledge that this, life, needs to be played with a lightness that allows one to navigate around the edges.

In a typically surprising passage, Berkson highlights the ampersand in a newlywed couple's address:

*Just as you were saying your mutual “I dos” . . .  
Infinitesimal bingo! 'Twas the enamored cosmos sounding off in perfect pitch:  
“My loves,” I heard it humming plainly, “marriage on Earth has this huge, undeniable*

*'&' in it — the ampersand of dailiness & rapture, of wow & whoops, of  
piecemeal logic & postprandial why not, so on & etcetera!”*

(from "For Jim & Nina")

If you are ready for some wow & whoops & some pre- or postprandial why not, some dailiness & rapture, please help me welcome Bill Berkson to Dia.