

Dia Art Foundation

Bob Holman and Thomas Fink

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, March 15, 2012, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Thomas Fink

Thomas Fink was born in New York City in 1954. He has three degrees, all of them in English literature — a BA from Princeton in 1976, an MA from Columbia in 1977, and a PhD from Columbia in 1981. He is the author of seven books of poetry, including *After Taxes* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2004), *Clarity and Other Poems* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2008), *Yinglish Strophes 1-19* (Truck Books, 2009), *Autopsy Turvy* (Meritage Press, 2010), a book of collaborative poetry with Maya Diablo Mason, and most recently *Peace Conference* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2011). He is the author of a book of criticism, *A Different Sense of Power: Problems of Community in Late-Twentieth Century Poetry* (FDU Press, 2001), and he co-edited *Burning Interiors: David Shapiro's Poetry and Poetics* (FDU Press). Fink is a Professor of English at CUNY-LaGuardia and lives in New York City.

The poems in Fink's 2004 collection, *After Taxes*, have a classically deranged diction that feels spot on. It is original and entertaining, while channeling that secret-weapon poet's poet Jim Brodey, among other senses of 1960s and '70s experimental poetics. Most of the poems have titles that continue into their first lines, à la Marianne Moore, but the effect is rarely genteel. Humor leavens the disorganization, and there is a cumulative beauty in the abstract rhythms. Sometimes he surprises himself. More and more, since that time, Fink has worked in sequences, which are simultaneously conceptual, visual, and aural. In that way, he aligns himself with many of the concerns of the Language Poets. At the same time, he connects to identity politics with his Yinglish Strophes. The term "Yinglish" refers to Yiddish syntax transported into English. Other Fink series include the Dented Reprises, the Nonce Sonnets, the Deconstructed Sestinas, the Hay(na)ku/Exfoliations, the Goats, and the Dusk Bowl Intimacies. In *Generic Whistle Stop*, a long poem originally published by Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, narrow strands of words intersect like DNA helixes or butterfly wings. This long visual poem begins, "Are we/con/script/ed, cam/paign/-long, //career-/long, /insanely/long, /to drum/for a/rumor, as/though it can/be a/promise, /potent/as stat/istics/that need/little/gloss?" As words and parts of words are atomized, readers are encouraged to interpret "paign," the second syllable of "campaign" as "pain," a feeling of suffering. It is fast, elegant, poetry, and it will take you for a ride, if you let it. Let it! And please welcome Thomas Fink to Dia.

Bob Holman

Bob Holman was born in 1948 in La Follette, Tennessee, graduated Columbia College in 1970, and studied with Ted Berrigan and Alice Notley at the St Marks Poetry Project. He has taught at Naropa University, The New School, Bard College, Columbia and NYU, and in workshops throughout the US, Central and South America, Europe and Africa. Holman has been a central presence on the poetry performance scene for decades, beginning in poets' theater, slam and hiphop poetry, first at the Nuyorican Poets Café, of which he was director from 1989-1996, then at the Bowery Poetry Club, which he founded with his wife, the painter Elizabeth Murray, in 2002, and of which he is the Artist Director. He produced five seasons of "Poetry Spots" for WNYC-TV, for which he won three Emmys, and the five-part PBS series, *The United States of Poetry*, which won an INPUT (International Public Television) Prize. He was the host of MTV's "Spoken Word Unplugged," has appeared on "HBO Def Poetry Jam," and created the first major spoken word record label, Mouth Almighty/Mercury. Bob's current mission is bringing attention to endangered languages — as half the languages on the planet will probably disappear this century. His three-part series on this subject, "On the Road," is available on LinkTV, and he is in preparation for "Word Up!," a 90-minute special for PBS Endangered Languages, shot in Australia, Wales, Hawaii. Recent travels in this regard have included trips to visit the griots of West Africa and their counterparts, the azmaris of Ethiopia. Bob Holman is the author of 15 books of poetry, including *Tear To Open* (Power Mad Press, 1979), *Panic DJ* (The VRI Theater Library, 1987), *The Collect Call Of The Wild* (Henry Holt, 1995), *A Couple Of Ways Of Doing Something*, a collaboration with Chuck Close (Aperture, 2006), and *Picasso in Barcelona* (Paper Kite Press, 2011). He has released several CDs of his poetry and music collaborations, including *In With The Out Crowd* (Mouth Almighty/Mercury 1996) and *The Awesome Whatever* (Bowery Records, 2007).

Bob Holman's poems traverse traditions, dialects, dialectics, while always maintaining a down-home, easy-going American way of using common speech as poetry. He makes this seem easy, but it's very complex. Don't try this at home! In fact, maybe you should only ever try it in front of an audience. At least, that is what Holman has always bet the farm on — the one-to-one or one-to-many transition of the

power that is the human power of communication. Many of his books recuperate performance texts, but all his poetry is someone talking. His 1979 collection, *Tear To Open*, begins: "Go Ahead/Open the door/Hello white water/Hello there bridge/Hello figure/On the other/Side of the bridge/Saying hello/Just myself". Holman's Panic DJ's rhymes and trills adapted rap's rhythms to his downtown art-based experience, and found it could fit. Holman has penned occasional poems, such as "1990," with its refrain: "It's 1990/and Nelson Mandela is free!" More recently, he devoted a book-length work to imagining the voice of the young Picasso, before the painter left his hometown of Barcelona for the big city. These poems are the apex of Holman's achievement — lightly touching on the master, calling out his foibles, as a way of observing foibles we all have, while simultaneously charging the youthful painter's ambition and grace, as a way of suggesting we all can possess such qualities. It is a heroic sequence, in the face of dire realities. It sings, and lets the spirit loose to dance among the barroom shadows. We should all join the dance, he seems to say. It is a great pleasure for all of us that Bob will be joined in his performance this evening by longtime collaborator and friend Papa Susso.

Alhaji Papa Susso

Alhaji Papa Susso is a master kora player and oral historian from The Gambia, West Africa. Hailing from a long line of griots (traditional oral historians) of the Mandinka people, he was taught the kora by his father and has been playing since the age of five. Of his eleven children, seven are griots. The kora, a 21-stringed harp-lute, is the preferred instrument of Mandinka Jalolu, itinerant musicians who were traditionally attached to royal courts, where their duties included recounting the tribal history and genealogy, composing commemorative songs, and performing at important tribal events. Today Papa Susso is a goodwill ambassador traveling around North America, giving classroom presentations and formal concert performances, where he recounts the history of his country and his people, discusses the roles of griots in West African culture, and performs the classic songs of the griot repertoire. He has been Regents' Lecturer in ethnomusicology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is director of the Koriya Musa Research Center in Gambia. He has several albums, including *Sotuma-Sere*, classical praise proverbs, and *A Gathering of Elders*, which mixes ancient kora melodies and contemporary African-American rhythms, and his most recent release, *Kayes Jali Naana*. He has been working with Bob Holman for ten years — Bob translated his first book of poems and the two created the TV documentary, "On the Griot Trail," now on LinkTV.org. He has performed all over Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North America, and in venues such as New York City's Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center in DC.

Please welcome Bob Holman and Papa Susso to Dia!