

Dia Art Foundation

Charles Bernstein and Tim Peterson (Trace)

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, December 16, 2010, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Tim Peterson (Trace)

Tim Peterson was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1978, and educated at Wesleyan University, graduating in 2000. He is currently a Ph.D. Student in English at CUNY Graduate Center. He worked at MIT Press, where he organized a series of discussions, The Analogous Series, on collaborations between poetry and the visual arts. He has also worked for the publisher Routledge and as a graphic designer in the architectural field. His first book of poems, *Since I Moved In*, won the Gil Ott Award and was published by Chax Press in 2007. Peterson is also author of the chapbooks *Cumulus* (Portable Press At Yo-Yo Labs, 2004) and *Trinkets Mashed Into A Blender* (Faux Press/e, 2005). He has a brand-new chapbook, *VIOLET SPEECH*, just out from 2nd Avenue Poetry. He edits *EOAGH: A Journal of the Arts* and curates a number of events in New York, including the Zinc Bar poetry series, the TENDENCIES: Poetics & Practice talks series on queer theory and the manifesto at CUNY Graduate Center, and (with Vincent Katz) the panel discussion series Quips & Cranks at The School of Visual Arts. Peterson is co-editing, with Gregory Laynor, the *Collected Writings of Gil Ott*, which is forthcoming from Chax Press in 2011.

Much of Tim Peterson's poetry is written in prose. His sequence "Spontaneous Generator" begins, "It starts with a flow, under which wild plants grow, in the current, the opposite of death." The "flow" could be conceived as the liberty of a prose form, not to have to end at a line break; but the breath and phrasing are particular, poetic. The "wild plants" might be the more isolated and striking phrases of poetry. The "current" is life, but also the flow of poetry or prose, as it moves along, attempting to make music out of life's occurrences. But I may be getting ahead of myself, as "Spontaneous Generation" is the third section of Peterson's book, *Since I Moved In*. The first section consists of poems, while the second, "Sites Of Likeness," is composed of mixed-genre texts investigating the specific geography of Hartford, Connecticut. The first poem in the book, "Trans Figures," contains a disembodied voice: "It lusts after bodies of others, especially yours. / It eyes you as you go to put the milk back in the fridge." Found lines can sometimes be identified, as in the poem ("Thee And Thou") that begins, "An ocean tumbled by with a private boat," however, the reader's recognition that some of the phraseology is environmental is less significant than his growing awareness of a precise and delicate rhetoric that is distinctly Peterson's own. There is sometimes a Surrealist concatenation of images, combined with rolling meters in long lines, that recalls early New York School: "Tracheas commingle in the morning snow, and the sleds, / enervated but still real, struggle down the hill." (from "Winter Finds A Ration To End Itself With"). In Peterson's latest publication, *Violet Speech*, prose and poetry are mixed, to cumulative effect, the poetry almost functioning as refrains for the prose, while the prose obfuscates as much as it clarifies. The Mark Rothko subject matter seems a smoke screen for another subject altogether. This publication marks a new step in the evolution of the poet Tim Peterson who is also the performer and persona Trace. Please welcome Tim Peterson AKA Trace to Dia.

Charles Bernstein

It is a pleasure to welcome Charles Bernstein back to Dia; he first read at Dia in December of 1997. Charles Bernstein was born in New York City in 1950. He attended the Bronx High School of Science and Harvard University, from which he graduated in 1972 with a BA in philosophy. His undergraduate dissertation was called "Three Steins." It was about linguistic reference and the poetics of the ordinary in Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gertrude Stein (the third Stein is Bernstein). After two years in Santa Barbara in the mid 1970s, he moved back to New York, where he has been based ever since. In the mid-1970s, Bernstein and Ted Greenwald started the Ear Inn poetry reading series, which often brought together Language poets and New York School poets on the same bill. From 1978 to 1981, Bruce Andrews and Bernstein published the groundbreaking periodical, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. In 1990, Bernstein was appointed to the David Gray chair at SUNY Buffalo and was later named SUNY Distinguished Professor. In 2003, he moved to the University of Pennsylvania, where he was appointed Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature. At Penn, with Al Filreis, he co-founded PennSound, a web-based audio and video archive of poets reading their work. In 2006, Bernstein was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. He is the author of 40 books, ranging from chapbooks to large-scale collections of poetry and essays, libretti, translations, and collaborations, several with his wife, the painter Susan Bee. Recent books of poems include: *All the Whiskey in*

Heaven: Selected Poems (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010); *Girly Man* (University of Chicago Press, 2006); *With Strings* (University of Chicago Press, 2001); and *Republics of Reality: 1975-1995* (Sun & Moon Press, 2000). He has published two books of essays: *A Poetics* (Harvard University Press, 1992); and *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Sun & Moon Press, 1986, 1994; reprinted by Northwestern University Press, 2001); and one essay/poem collection: *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (University of Chicago Press, 1999). In spring 2011, University of Chicago Press will publish Bernstein's *The Attack of the Difficult Poems: Essays & Inventions*.

Charles Bernstein's poetry is the perfect soundtrack for many people's life-long desire not to be normal. In particular, it is the perfect soundtrack for a generation of people who came of age in the 1970s. Whereas some may take Bernstein's poetic corpus as a celebration of diversity, a clarion call for the right to be unfettered in terms of style and genre, I would argue almost the opposite: the wonderful stylistic movement from body of work to body of work reveals a consistent voice, and that voice, while it can be playful and is often hilarious, is uniform in its reaction to whatever can be considered a norm of poetry, or writing in general. Poetry and prose, in Bernstein's work, are famously interwoven. In his essay "State Of The Art," Bernstein writes, "What interests me is a poetry and a poetics that do not edit out so much as edit in: that include multiple conflicting perspectives and types of languages and styles in the same poetic work or... the same collection of essays." And when he adds that he hopes readers will be tempted to read his critical prose as poetry, there is a very real sense in which that is possible. Yet, in his selected poems, *All The Whiskey In Heaven*, published this year, one is struck by the roundness of Bernstein's tone, so that, while particular words sometimes seem chosen at random, the music is identifiable. The voice that goes from disparate words strung across a page to something familiar and almost prosaic is above all musical. And the familiarity, while sometimes appropriated, or seemingly appropriated, often reminds us of the ways our own minds work, as in "As If The Trees By Their Very Roots Had Hold Of Us," published in 1979, which begins, "Strange to remember a visit, really not so / Long ago, which now seems, finally, past... first you anticipate a thing & it seems / Far off, the distance has a weight you can feel / Hanging on you, & then it's there — that / Point — whatever — which, now, while / It's happening seems to be constantly slipping away... / until / You can only look back on it, & yet you're still there..." There is something poignant, elegiac, and, I would stress, non-ironic about these phrases. More common in Bernstein's early poetry is a willful, one wants to say joyful, placing of words in unexpected arrangements. One notices the constant shifting of where the breaks occur — by the paragraph (or stanza), by the sentence, by the phrase, by the word, by the letter. There is something comprehensive in this approach: a Well-Tempered Poetics. While often harshly disjunctive — an appropriate trope for those who do not fit in — Bernstein's poetry can also bend classical rhetoric into newly effective streams: "Time wounds all heals, spills through / with echoes neither idea nor lair / can jam." ("You" 1983). In his appropriated texts, Bernstein reveals an equally controlled manipulation of both language and tone, allowing irony to loom large but not to capsize his vessel, as in this work composed of descriptions of television programs: "A retarded young man witnesses a murder but is not articulate enough to tell his story to the police... Bachelors are all agape over a new girl in town... A mental patient returns home to a cold mother and a domineering husband..." ("Contradiction Turns To Rivalry" 1983). More recently, Bernstein has investigated meta-poems — poems that only describe themselves or their possible legal contingencies. He has turned to rhyming quatrains, composing poems that appropriate an almost sing-song cadence in situations of familial intimacy. Bernstein has also written powerful political poems, such as "War Stories" and "The Ballad Of The Girly Man" the latter dedicated to his son, Felix. I have seen and heard Bernstein read several times, and each time it has been entirely different. Like an actor — a method poet, let's call him — he is able to be subsumed into the character a poem requires. In a reading of Jack Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*, amid a cast of stellar readers, Bernstein stood out as the only one who actually sounded like a junkie. Tonight's reading is sure to be just as memorable. Please join me in welcoming Charles Bernstein back to Dia.