

Dia Art Foundation

# Eileen Myles and Stacy Szymaszek

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, November 18, 2010, 6:30 pm

## Introduction by Vincent Katz

### Stacy Szymaszek

Stacy Szymaszek was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the summer of 1969 and grew up there. She studied at the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee), graduating in 1991 with a BA in Literature. She is the author of the books *Emptied Of All Ships* (2005) and *Hyperglossia* (2009), both published by Litmus Press, as well as numerous chapbooks, including *Pasolini Poems* (Cy Press, 2005), *Orizaba: A Voyage with Hart Crane* (Faux Press, 2008), *Stacy S.: Autoportraits* (OMG, 2008), and *from Hart Island* (Albion Books, 2009). From 1999 to 2005, she worked at Woodland Pattern Book Center in Milwaukee. In 2005, she moved to New York City, where she is the Artistic Director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church.

Stacy Szymaszek's poetry makes clear for her reader the distinction between vertical and horizontal. Reading *Emptied Of All Ships*, one is lulled, as by waves, by narrow lines of verse flowing, page by page, most of them composed of only one or two words. The whole book takes seafaring as its métier, and this is both literal and metaphoric, historical and current, about craft and emotion. As abstract as much of the language is, due to its determined diminishing of syntax's constraints, still the personal keeps making itself felt: "width of / back / belted // sodium / poultice // exhausts / courtship" "drain / a home / of you" "phenomena / foregone / for me" and significantly "assonance / her aspect". Lulled, as I said, by such lines, it is a shock to discover, on page 53, in the poem "some mariners," a completely opposite sense of line, one that moves from side to side in long sweeps: "sequent of waves albumen ferment / white cap floats hum syllables of elegy". From there, the flow opens, and there is a playing with translation. Ostensibly by an unidentified "James," these translations from the Chinese, notes at the back reveal, are really by Kenneth Rexroth and others. Translation plays a central role in Szymaszek's chapbook, *Pasolini Poems*. Read on its own, *Pasolini Poems* is a tasteful homage to the master cineaste, poet and novelist. When you compare it with Pasolini's own *Roman Poems*, published by City Lights in 1986 in a bi-lingual edition with translations by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Francesca Valente, you find that Szymaszek has actually written one poem for every Pasolini poem, keeping his original titles. It is common for poets to base works on other works — whether literary, visual, performative, sociological, historical, etc. Somehow, Szymaszek manages deftly to avoid the pitfalls of idolatry. While hewing closely to Pasolini's original lines and ideas, she distills a verbal and personal experience that is utterly distinct. Szymaszek's most recent book is *Hyperglossia*, which my memory of Greek tells me should mean "An over-tonguing." As in *Emptied Of Ships*, the visual aspect of the poems is central, with words separated on lines in a way that reminds me of certain Anne Waldman poems from the 1970s. Again, though, Szymaszek exploits this genre in a way that was only hinted at before. It is a mode that is at once welcoming and highly entertaining, though only intermittently comprehensible in the standard sense. The first page of the first section reads in its entirety: "ka ker flutt / clutter head injry / sincere corps // compendia / ah / guardiam // sachets of natron / pork crackle / armor // bid // ity" Humor is a constant ingredient as well, as in the page which has as its header in italics the abbreviation "cont." If you pronounce that aloud, it has a decidedly different meaning from the word originally italicized and abbreviated. In fact, you could say, on a linguistic — or hyperlinguistic — level, Szymaszek has *unabbreviated* and *unitalicized* a word, that, in its sudden revelation, elicits a smile along with much else. I hope that Stacy will be read some of the poems from *Hyperglossia* tonight. Whatever she reads, I can guarantee that she will stimulate your intellect, your senses, and your sensibility. Please welcome to Dia Stacy Szymaszek.

### Eileen Myles

Eileen Myles was born in Cambridge, MA, in 1949, was educated in Catholic schools and graduated from U. Mass. (Boston) in 1971. She moved to New York in 1974, gave her first reading at CBGB, then studied with Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley, and Paul Violi at the Poetry Project. She edited *dodgems* magazine during 1977-79, which was, as she puts it, "a poetry magazine which presented a collision of New York School, Language Poetry, performance texts and other likely aesthetics of the time." She was the Director of the Poetry Project from 1984-86. Her first three books of poems were striking entries in the annals of poet-run presses: *The Irony Of The Leash*, 1978, Jim Brodey Books; *A Fresh Young Voice From The Plains*, 1981, Power Mad Books; and *Sappho's Boat*, Little Caesar

Press, 1982. *Not Me* was published by SemioText(e) in 1991. Myles published three books of poems with Black Sparrow Press: *Maxfield Parrish*, 1995; *School Of Fish*, 1997; and *Skies*, 2001. Her most recent book of poems is *Sorry, Tree*, 2007, from Wave Books. She has also published a book of stories, two novels — most recently, *Inferno*, from Or Books — and *The Importance Of Being Iceland: Travel Essays In Art* from Semiotext(e). In 2010 the Poetry Society of America awarded Myles the Shelley Prize.

Eileen Myles is ever-glamorous. I love the fine line between invented and discovered. Eileen is almost always there. She invented or discovered herself, we find by reading her poetry and prose, and she became an icon as a kind of writer we didn't know we needed, though we might have predicted it, had we been able to think ahead. There is a lot of Eileen at home in her poems — her apartments, her dogs, her lovers, her broccoli. So, this is a poetry of daily life, but not daily life as Frank O'Hara envisioned it, tie flapping happily over his shoulder, as he buys a hot dog on Fifth Avenue on his lunch break. Myles' daily life begins in her earliest book lyrically, but hesitantly: "Sort of / Thought I'd hear from you. I thought / Well, he'll either be in the same mood/Or different." (from the poem "Homebody" from *The Irony Of The Leash*, 1978). However, there is another poem from the same book that shows a different aspect of Myles' poetry — a consciousness that is constantly searching in words for patterns to realize itself: "this is why it rains today / green always requires a form / nudging selves from inner chambers / hospital rooms would pretend some calm..." (from "Green" from *Irony*). A gathering sense of the body — a woman's body — appears — "I feel one tit / well I feel two" (from "Dawn" from *A Fresh Young Voice*) — and it never goes away. This sense is sensual in a ravishing way, directly limning desire, that is a woman's graphic desire for the bodies of other women. A political consciousness also appears, as in her poem "On The Death Of Robert Lowell," which begins, "O, I don't give a shit. / He was an old white haired man" (from *A Fresh Young Voice*). She sometimes goes back to her Irish Catholic neighborhood in Arlington, often with great tenderness and empathy, though she holds her parents accountable. She gets larger. She attacks the big topics, like poetry. "Poem On The Profession" begins "Language interests me / more than life" (from *Sappho's Boat*). She really hit her stride in *Not Me*, written in 1986-89. That was when she invented a self for herself in "An American Poem," by mixing reality and satire: "I hopped / on an Amtrak to New / York in the early / '70s and I guess / you could say / my hidden years / began. I thought / We'll I'll be a poet. / What could be more / foolish and obscure." But later in the poem she writes, "Yes, I am, / I am a Kennedy. / My attempts to remain / obscure have not served / me well." Poets are by their nature obscure, but Myles has not attempted to remain obscure, and she is anything but. She became a spokesperson for a generation, or generations, as when she writes, "That might be all / we invented this year... / it's great that we did / one single thing — to be different." (from "A Poem"). Still later, Eileen became a nature poet, writing about forests and dedicating a whole book of poems to the sky, or skies. Her use of language — line breaks, punctuation, shifts of subject — is unpredictable. Where she'll travel next we don't know. But we do know one thing — she will be great. Please welcome Eileen Myles.