

Dia Art Foundation

Elaine Equi and Jerome Sala

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, May 24, 2012, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

It is a pleasure to introduce Elaine Equi and Jerome Sala, and it is perfect that their reading is the grand finale to his season of readings. This series features pairings based on relationships, usually intergenerational, but the last reading before this one—Alan Gilbert and Paul Chan—was based not on generation but on collaboration. Today, we present that rare but not entirely unheard of phenomenon—the poet-couple. Two poets living together, sharing writing, thinking, reading. It must be a rich and rarefied environment. Except, with what we know of these two, it must also be hilarious much of the time. Elaine Equi and Jerome Sala are certainly two of the wittiest poets writing today. They are both completely of their time, and yet, we are witnessing too how they are both beyond time, instant classics. I have to add a personal note of how we met. It was the first time I organized a reading of these two, in 1981 at the University of Chicago. I got in touch with them and invited them to read, and they (Jerome I think) wrote back to say that they would be delighted to read and wanted to bill their reading as “Two Virgins,” which we did. Jerome set small candles around the floor and caught his kilt on fire. Suffice it to say, it was a memorable evening.

To give a little of the tenor of the times, and the world out of which Jerome and Elaine were coming, I'd like to read a couple of short sections from an interview I did with Jerome. Here is Jerome speaking:

“After I got out of college, the age of punk began. I hung out on that scene and started performing work in the back of punk clubs. My style got a lot more performative. Mayakovsky became a big influence then, along with anti-poets like Nicanor Parra. Also: crazy manifesto-type tones—Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto (as well as funny pieces like “Down with the Tango!”). At first there was no literary context for this new style. Then I met Elaine Equi (who was also influenced by punk) and we began performing together. This started an early performance poetry scene in Chicago. When Elaine and I started doing events together, my style came more or less into its own: direct, pop—with elements of parody and (I hoped) social satire.

“Early on, I did get dubbed a ‘punk poet.’ I used to recite my poems in the back of the first punk disco, Chicago's La Mere Vipere, on Halstead St. Like at a punk concert, I'd taunt the audience and they'd reciprocate. Lit cigarettes would fly back and forth between the crowd and stage, along with insults. But it was all in fun. And doing readings like this, you could get away with wearing outlandish get-ups and hairstyles.”

Jerome Sala

Jerome Sala was born in Evergreen Park, Illinois, in 1951, and grew up in Chicago, “in a neighborhood known as ‘Little Village,’ near the Cook County Jail, a gang-banger's neighborhood,” as he puts it, “lots and lots of gang activity.” Sala is fascinated by modes of discourse. “Poetry doesn't swear enough,” he says. “There are still walls of propriety that need to be broken down—and allowing this language from my background to come forth helps me work toward this, I hope.”

Sala is the author of many cult classics, including *Spaz Attack* (1980), *I Am Not a Juvenile Delinquent* (1985), *The Trip* (1987), *Raw Deal* (1994), *Look Slimmer Instantly* (2005), and most recently *Prom Night* (2011), a collaboration with artist Tamara Gonzales, featuring a sequence of Sala's goth/horror poems. He has a PhD in American Studies from New York University and has worked for ad agencies as a copywriter and creative director, which has influenced his more recent poetry. He maintains the blog *espresso bongo* at espressobongo.typepad.com, and lives and works in New York City.

In an early poem, “The Great,” Sala wrote, “I hate the great.//They prattle on and on with their admirable deeds,//words, thoughts, aphorisms,//till there's no room left for any of us.” He often has the pretentious and abusive in his crosshairs, but he is quick to be self-deprecating as well, as in the poem that begins, “I'm the type of guy who just wastes \$5.95 on the wrong book, then sentences himself to read it from cover to cover.” One of his most beautiful poems is “For John Lennon,” in which he is able to balance admiration, realism, despair, and anger: “You were clumsy like we are//when we try too hard to be cool.”

Turning to the poems in Sala's most recent collection, *Look Slimmer Instantly!*, in the poem “On Pain And Gain,” he attacks greed in a generalized way, almost as a moralist writing about the seven sins, while in “On Money And Bullshit,” he even seems to include himself

as susceptible to moral weakness. In the poem "God Bless America," he goes for a direct hit on the U.S.A., making clear his belief that the U.S. is the ringleader in fomenting the moral crises he alludes to in other poems. Please welcome the entertaining, elegant, street-smart, classic poet, Jerome Sala.

Elaine Equi

Elaine Equi was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1953. She is the author of many collections of poetry, including *Views Without Rooms* (1989), *Surface Tension* (1989), *Voice-Over* (1998), which won the San Francisco State Poetry Award, *Decoy* (1994), *Ripple Effect: New & Selected Poems* (2007), which was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Award and on the short list for the Griffin Poetry Prize, and most recently, *Click and Clone* (2011). Widely published and anthologized, Equi lives in New York City, where she teaches creative writing at New York University and in the MFA programs at the New School and City College of New York.

Elaine Equi is a master of innuendo, or is it mistress? She is always calling into question titles, roles—in daily life, dreams, in domestic relations, and in sexual relations. But she calls them into question with such wit and candor that we would never say she “deals with issues” in her poems. Rather, she finds locutions stimulating in themselves, that have wit built into them, then proceeds, seemingly, to fool around with them, amusing herself, until, like a wizard, bang! she comes up with a heady concoction. High culture is just as likely as low to be the content, but we get the feeling that Equi prefers when her content is a little down at the heels. Melancholy traipses through her poems, but so do gentleness, awareness and surprise. She is equally the master of the found and almost found poems—like “Things To Do In The Bible” and “Post Sonnet,” in which every line is a NY Post headline—and poems that she chisels out of, simultaneously, her perfectly pitched word bank and the quirky details of daily life. Many of her poems are hilarious without losing their balance.

Most surprising then—but why should they be?—are her sweet domestic poems addressed to or about her husband, poet Jerome Sala: “Breakfast With Jerome,” “Jerome Meditating” but also “Both Of Us Writing”: “Me in bed//and you at the table.////Both of us//writing////these rooms//this experience—////our marriage//the corridor between.” I present to you the indefinably fantastic Elaine Equi.