

Dia Art Foundation

Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Monday, April 8, 2013, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

It is a great pleasure to welcome Pierre Joris and Jerome Rothenberg to read at Dia tonight. We try in this series to create energetic pairings — often of poets of different generations, sometimes couples who are poets, sometimes poets and artists who have worked together. Tonight, you will have the unique experience of hearing from two people, who — in addition to their own voluminous work — have together created one of the most substantial and germane bodies of scholarship we have. What is astounding about them is that — in the face of bewildering change and cultural variety — they find a way to engage. Whereas many of us would wilt under the sheer volume of expression to be encountered in the world, these two seem to have a limitless appetite for expanding their, and our, realm of understanding of the worlds we live in. Pierre Joris will read first, followed by Jerome Rothenberg.

Pierre Joris was born in Strasbourg, France on July 14, 1946 and raised in Ettelbruck, Luxembourg. After studying medicine in Paris, he received a BA in Literature from Bard College in 1969, followed by an MA in the Theory and Practice of Translation from University of Essex in 1975, and a Ph.D. from SUNY Binghamton in Comparative Literature in 1990. He has taught extensively and since 1998 has been a professor in the English department at the University of Albany.

Joris has published over 40 books of poetry, essays, and translations. With Jerome Rothenberg, he co-edited *Poems for the Millennium, vol. 1 and 2: The University of California Book of Modern & Postmodern Poetry*. Rothenberg's & Joris's previous collaboration, *pppppp: Selected Writings of Kurt Schwitters* (Temple University Press, 1993, reissued in 2002 by Exact Change) was awarded the 1994 PEN Center USA West Literary Award for Translation. Rothenberg & Joris also co-edited & co-translated *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz & Other Writings of Pablo Picasso* (Exact Change, 2004). Joris's translation of *Lightduress* by Celan received the 2005 PEN Poetry Translation Award. Recently released are *The University of California Book of North African Literature* (vol. 4 in the *Poems for the Millennium* series), coedited with Habib Tengour (University of Chicago Press, 2012); *Exile is My Trade: A Habib Tengour Reader* edited and translated by Joris (Black Widow Press, 2012); and *Pierre Joris: Cartographies of the In-between*, with essays on Joris's work by selected poets, scholars, and translators (Litteraria Pragensia, 2011). Forthcoming in 2013 are *Barzakh* (Black Widow Press) and *The Collected Late Poems of Paul Celan*, translated and annotated by Joris (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux).

Pierre Joris is a writer who knows very well the root of texture in the word text. His own texts are finely woven, and I am always impressed by the level of historical and social consciousness he is able to weave into language that retains the freshness of spoken, unpremeditated thought. Here, for example, is a passage from one of his *Canti Diurni* (Daily Songs), from 1986:

dawn did
come slid in on
sirens over boulevards
the usual news stereo
phonic aubades
from the bedroom english
bbc voice
here in the living room
the french announcer

Joris's is a nomadic poetics, to use his term. "A nomadic poetics," he writes, "is ... always changing, morphing, moving through languages, cultures, terrains, times without stopping. Refuelling halts are called poases, they last a night or a day, the time of a poem, & then move on. A nomadic poetics needs mindfulness in & of the drift (dérive) — there is no at-homeness here, but only an ever more

displaced drifting. For the language to be accurate to the condition of nomadcity, it too has to be drifting, to be always 'on the way', as Celan puts it."

Pierre Joris, *Notes Towards a Nomadic Poetics*. I welcome you to the richly textural world of the poetry and thought of Pierre Joris.

Jerome Rothenberg was born on December 11, 1931 in Brooklyn and was raised in the Bronx. He attended the City College of New York, graduating in 1952 with a BA in English. In 1953, he received a Master's Degree in Languages and Literature from the University of Michigan. He did further graduate study at Columbia University, leaving in 1959 to concentrate on writing. He lived in New York City until 1972, when he moved to the Allegany Seneca Reservation in western New York State to live until 1974, when he moved to San Diego. From 1989 to 1999, he was a professor of visual arts and literature at the University of California, San Diego.

Rothenberg has published over eighty books as author, translator, and editor, including his seminal *Technicians of the Sacred* (University of California Press, 1968), which initiated the approach to poetry Rothenberg named "ethnopoetics." Other anthologies include *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas*(1972); *A Big Jewish Book: Poems & Other Visions of the Jews from Tribal Times to the Present* (revised and republished as *Exiled in the Word*, 1977 and 1989); *America Prophecy: A New Reading of American Poetry from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present* (1973) and *Poems for the Millennium*, whose third volume was co-edited by Rothenberg and Jeffrey Robinson (University of California Press, 1995, 1998, 2009). Recent books of Rothenberg's poetry include *A Cruel Nirvana* (SplitLevel Texts, 2012), *Retrievals: Uncollected & New Poems 1955-2010* (Junction Press, 2011), *Concealments & Caprichos* (Black Widow Press, 2010), *Gematria Complete* (Marick Press, 2009), and *Triptych* (New Directions, 2007). *Eye of Witness: A Jerome Rothenberg Reader* (Black Widow Press) is forthcoming in 2013.

As a poet who has embraced the modernist legacy of the fragmentary and contingent, as well as the Deep Image, a term he developed with colleague Robert Kelly, reflecting not only Lorca's sense of rootedness but a range of performative poetics determined for occasions by indigenous cultures throughout the world, Jerome Rothenberg pursues ramification, denies the existence of closure. Many of his works, particularly recent ones, cull language and ideas from other works, often reconfiguring his own writings. One such work he may be reading from tonight, *The Jigoku Zoshi Hells: A Book Of Variations*, does just that. In *The Jigoku Zoshi Hells*, Rothenberg applies this process, which he calls "a step beyond translation," to a work of his own from 1962, drawing themes from ancient Japanese painted scrolls.

Another work Rothenberg may be reading from tonight, entitled "Divagations," makes use of a different kind of contingency. Here, the poet provides "alternate readings" to lines in his poems. While drawing our attention to the process of composition, these alternates also keep the poem continuously activated, an energetic field for the poet as much as the reader. Sometimes, the shocks are humorous: "Even so" becomes "Ebb & flow"; "the stooping man" may really be "the *stupid* man," etc. And yet, this dense sequence is full of ruminations on the powers and limits of language. Eventually, he writes:

At its outer limits art makes way for art: the art of empty*
* broken
promises like the art of resignation, circumstance, upheaval*,
* denial
blindness, solitude, chimeras, dancing standing still,
returning to a former place, forgetting, torturing yourself
& others, going overboard.

Art, like experience, is a place of difficulty and risk. But the communal enactment of our responses — sung, danced, chanted — provides protective covering for a time. The poetry of Jerome Rothenberg makes this rite available. Please help me in welcoming him to Dia.