

Dia Art Foundation

# Larry Fagin and Mitch Highfill

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Tuesday, September 16, 2014, 6:30 pm

## Introduction by Vincent Katz

**Mitch Highfill** is the author of *Liquid Affairs* (United Artists, 1995), *Blue Dahlia* (detour), *Koenig's Sphere* (Situations, 2003), *A Dozen Sonnets* (Faux - e, 2004), *Rebis* (2007), and *Moth Light* (2008). His work has appeared in the journals *Cue*, *Snare*, *Gallery Works*, *The Poker* and *The World* and in the anthology *Heights of the Marvelous* (2000).

Mitch Highfill is a funflinger. He captures words at pitch point and shuffles them into his deck of perception. Olympic beer, Olympic sandwiches, Olympic grocery, Olympic gourmet. He has used chance operations, flirted with flarf; he has google-sculpted and bibliomanced. He is capable of abrupt juxtaposition in good New York manner, but Highfill is also a lyric love poet, in the mode of poets of old. New York may be his pasture, but his passion is every bit as real as theirs. "If you take your clothes off / I will too" begins an early poem, "Alba." Like much of Highfill's work, it ends as an ode to the city, this city. His language is often plain, but don't let the casual manner deceive you. He is an expert painter of wordscapes. At their best, which is frequently, his poems coalesce into mental scenarios, which are gracious, familiar, and funny too. Not the laugh-out-loud kind of funny (well, maybe sometimes), but the kind known in the 18th-century as wit.

His new poems still seem 18th-century, but in a more muscular vein, as though Highfill has ingested strong doses of Alexander Pope. His poems have grown more complex and densely packed. His lines surge muscularly, his breath seemingly infinitely expansive, as in this passage from "Filtered and Electrified":

Tongue-tied costs too much  
and we could be baking on  
the beach or prospecting for  
a sense of the collective  
in wings and white tunics.

Yet these poems, like his early poems, have the tug of honestly-perceived emotion, and Highfill is able to lay that on us as a gift almost, seemingly off-hand, still the master of all he surveys. Please welcome Mitch Highfill to Dia.

**Larry Fagin** is a poet, editor, publisher, and teacher. He published the ground-breaking *Adventures in Poetry* magazine and continues to publish *Adventures in Poetry* books; he also edited the poetry magazine *Sal Mimeo* and the monthly poetry zine *Un Poco Loco*. He is the author of *Rhymes of a Jerk* (Kulchur Foundation, 1974), *I'll Be Seeing You: Selected Poems* (Full Court Press, 1978), and he has done books in collaboration with the artists George Schneeman, Richard Tuttle, and Trevor Winkfield. Fagin's most recent book is *Complete Fragments* (Cuneiform, 2012).

Larry Fagin's early poems share a concrete quality with the early poems of Aram Saroyan. Even more than Saroyan's, though, Fagin's poems feel like sculptures or other forms of art. Their visual aspect on the page is declarative. In addition, the statements these poems make are reduced, compacting their energy:

The evil eye  
is ridiculous,

but it exists.

A dry sense of humor holds it all together, masking the technical brilliance: Fagin works equally with prose, with parataxis, with childlike rhyme.

As his recent book, *Complete Fragments*, makes clear, he is a contemporary master of that venerated but perilous form, the prose-poem. In these works, he navigates tone and sensibility like a master sailor. He is conversant with the dangers and possesses intimate knowledge of the coastline. In "Know Which Back Yards Connect," Fagin starts with a sententia about aging:

Not every story happens to everybody. You've changed some of your ideas. One of them was there's too much time in life. Not anymore.

The miraculous thing is, even though the next line is, "I still have sputum," and the poem ends with punning homonyms, it still retains its

seriousness. Possibly, this is due to the poem's context as a work dedicated to fellow poet Diane di Prima. Many of Fagin's works through the years have been collaborative or have been dedicated to colleagues. His publishing and teaching are part of the same humanistic effort.

Fagin's most recent poems take all the qualities he has perfected and put them on a full-tilt speed-coaster, "like bebop with feedback," as he writes in "Call Ahead." Or he can provide us with, as he puts it in "Cellar Door," "various earth dreams." These new poems are limpid, stripped-down, precise, and ready for use. Catch him before he moves again. Please welcome Larry Fagin to Dia.