

Dia Art Foundation

Lewis Warsh and John Coletti

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Tuesday, March 10, 2014, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

John Coletti is the author of *Physical Kind* (2005, Portable Press @ Yo-Yo Labs), *Same Enemy Rainbow* (2008, Fewer & Further Press), *Mum Halo* (2010, Rust Buckle Books), and *SKASERS*, a half-book with Anselm Berrigan (2012, flowers & cream). Other recent projects include a libretto for an opera composed by Caleb Burhans and the eagerly anticipated collection, *Deep Code*, forthcoming from City Lights later this year.

"Explosively Rational," the first poem in John Coletti's new book, begins, "We keep ruining our lives to be wonderful". There could be many interpretations to this line, but what comes to mind to me is Paolo Sorrentino's recent film, *La Grande Belleza*. Coletti's poetry, especially his recent poetry, has something of Sorrentino's ability to consolidate the humanity of a generation's failure (of everyone's ultimate failure) within a large-scale cultural scope. Coletti's poem continues, "I am not / convinced / but / neither am I / unconvinced." Like Jep Gambardella, Coletti, in his poems, is intimately connected to, yet curiously apart from the world he observes.

Coletti's poetry is known for its rapid jumps from subject to subject, verb tense to verb tense — again a somewhat cinematic effect, aligned to a latter-day avant-garde version but very much in the pocket of his culture — a wide-spreading group of fellow renegade artists. That mode re-appears in his new book, as in the conclusion to the poem "I'll Show You":

Connecticut flags
wasted on Hart Street
a lifelong beating
in mills, ships and factories
the cigarette freedom of
debt free living
optics / emotions / confusions
art's deeply feeling lost

But an additional, more continuous, mode continues to surface in Coletti's recent poetry. Here is his short poem "Yesterday's Papers" in its entirety: "I touch gentle people / in peaceful ways / albeit / aggressively / @ the heart / only one way / to love / don't / break easily". Interestingly, he seems able to maintain both modes, and his readers and listeners have come to recognize the roundness of his rhythms that consistently anchors his work, no matter how abruptly he may choose to swerve. Coletti's recent work, from which he'll be reading tonight, continues its experimental frisson on the levels of word and syllable, while experimenting too with a newer poetic that, in doing less violence to traditional syntax, allows him to encompass even larger aesthetic and social pools. It is a great pleasure to welcome John Coletti to Dia.

Lewis Warsh is the author of numerous volumes of poetry, including *The Suicide Rates* (Toad Press, 1967), *Moving Through Air* (Angel Hair Books, 1968), *Dreaming As One* (Corinth Books, 1971), *Methods of Birth Control* (Sun & Moon Books, 1983), *Avenue Of Escape* (Long News Books, 1995), *The Origin Of The World* (Creative Arts Book Company, 2001), and *Inseparable: Poems 1995-2005* (Granary Books, 2008). *One Foot Out The Door: Collected Stories* is forthcoming from Spuyten Duyvil, and Ugly Duckling Presse will publish his new poetry collection, *Alien Abduction*, from which he will be reading tonight.

A clear trajectory has defined the poetry of Lewis Warsh, from his earliest publications until today. A supple, limpid, use of language and rhythm, a seemingly daily phraseology, a sublime mix of the overheard, the found, the attended to, and the personal, long ago secured him a place at the center of a revolution in poetry that continues to expand daily.

Warsh's early work shared a common ear for current language with such poets as Tom Clark, Anne Waldman, and Gerard Malanga, but in his more recent poems, Warsh has refined his statements to a crystalline lucidity of expression that is observably his own, while still partaking of the general discourse of his times.

Warsh works in a flamboyant style bred through deceptively everyday causality, yet he is adept at subverting expectations he himself sets up, leaving the reader to recognize the person behind the poems. That person performs verbal miracles, while slyly but consistently transgressing accepted social norms.

One mode he is fond of is a kind of updated couplet, in which he pumps up a thought or direction in the first line, only to deflate it in the

second, as in his poem "Eye Contact," which begins:

We make eye contact across the crowded room
but I'm too tired to speak
I write her a letter but at the last minute
decide not to mail it

Warsh has worked in many poetic modes, all of his own devising, from prosy, notebook-like, entries, to chiseled, lyrical lines. In a longish poem called "The Songbook" from *Alien Abduction*, Warsh writes:

I thought that I would
live an orderly life but
instead I made a mess
for which I have to
admit I'm not contrite
so don't even start

There's an affective melancholy in some of Warsh's new work that is often offset by a touch of wit, a tart reminder that things, while they may seem bad, are probably slightly ridiculous too — and the narrator of the poems, while he may seem to have a lot in common with Warsh, is not actually him, though he is us. Please welcome the narrator of his poems and Lewis Warsh himself to Dia.