

Dia Art Foundation

Michael Lally and Brenda Iijima

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, April 21, 2011, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Brenda Iijima

Brenda Iijima was born in 1967 at the foot of Mount Greylock in North Adams, Massachusetts. She has a Bachelor of Science degree from Skidmore College, where she also studied painting. She is the author of *Around Sea* (O Books, 2004), *Animate, Inanimate Aims* (Litmus Press, 2007), *revv. you'll—ution* (Displaced Press, 2009) and *If Not Metamorphic* (Ahsakta Press, 2010) as well as numerous chapbooks and artist's books. She is also the editor of *eco language reader* (Nightboat Books, 2010). Currently she is working on a body of work titled *Some Simple Things Said by and About Humans* — a chronicle of how humans have used animals as surrogates. She is also doing research on women who were murdered in North Adams during the 1970's.

Brenda Iijima is a hybrid figure — she is full of fiery energy, and you are never sure exactly how it will manifest itself. With her press, Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, for most of the past decade, Iijima has produced a string of remarkably designed and produced books. Books of poems by her ever-widening circle of consciousness, they are also artist's books, designed by Iijima. They were the first work of hers I knew and impressed me by their visionary ambition and commitment to that timeless task of spreading the word.

When I became aware of Iijima's poetry, I was amazed by the sophistication of her verbal interplay. In *Animate, Inanimate Aims*, the LANGUAGE is in service of the mythology. From the first line in the book: Prostrating before the golden figure we are in the midst of a primal rite: "Chagrin/Of the maidens/Bleeds // Shackle as sharp complication" In the second poem, a connection between ancient grass and the post-modern moment is made literal in the words, "Polis pushed/Outside". While later, "Sex takes charge of vicissitude." Iijima juxtaposes words and phrases in ways that show her involvement with Language Poetry's concerns with diction and syntax. Yet it is her particular concern for a common archeology that is impressive: *Animate, Inanimate Aims* p. 60 Caravaggio "Crater's Edge" Iijima's feminist and increasingly ecological concerns make themselves felt in two new bodies of work, from which she'll be reading tonight, *SOME SIMPLE THINGS SAID BY AND ABOUT HUMANS* and *UNTIMELY DEATH IS DRIVEN OUT BEYOND THE HORIZON*. Ultimately, it is a sense of shared existence that is Iijima's essential tone. Please welcome Brenda Iijima.

Michael Lally

Michael Lally was born in Orange, New Jersey, in 1942. He attended the University of Iowa Writers Workshop on the GI Bill in the late 1960s, after four years in the U.S. Air Force. While in Iowa, he was almost elected sheriff of Johnson County on the Peace and Freedom ticket. Lally has had 27 books published, including the 2000 American Book Award winner *It's Not Nostalgia* and its follow-up *It Takes One to Know One* (both from Black Sparrow Press) and the 2006 edition of his long poem *March 18, 2003*, written in protest on the eve of the invasion of Iraq. Just out, the CD *Lost Angels*, recordings of poems from the '70s, '80s and early '90s set to music with a cover photo by Gus Van Sant. Lally has worked as a film and TV actor on shows like *NYPD Blue* (playing a New York artist), *Deadwood*, and as a writer on films including *Drugstore Cowboy*. Since 2006, Lally has been writing a blog called *Lally's Alley* covering poetry, movies, and politics, among other topics. His blog tag reads:

"just another ex-jazz-musician/proto-rapper/Jersey-Irish-poet-actor/print-junkie/film-raptor/beat-hipster-"white Negro"-rhapsodizer/ex-hippie-punk-'60s-radical-organizer's take on all things cultural, political, spiritual & aggrandizing."

Michael Lally's poems are very hard to excerpt, because they are raps, flows, not rap as it is thought of today, though it has some DNA relation to that, but rap as it was used in the 1960s, when Lally began writing. He was in the airforce, and also a jazz piano player, when he saw a copy of Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* on a friend's table, picked it up, read "The Day Lady Died," and was hooked. You can find Lally's entire biography in his remarkable body of poetry and prose. While the prose is mainly in the form of engrossing, time-shifting, memoir, the poetry is often squarely in the present. One of the first poems I remember reading by Lally, entitled simply "Life," begins:

Someone comes up to me on the street

starts talking about their “love life” —
how “fucked up it is” — pushing their need.

There is a hard-hitting realism to his poems — one gets the feeling one is getting Life as it “really” is, no bullshit, all the while aware of the extreme artifice and art that goes into the wordplay, the rhythms, and ins and outs of thoughts to get you where he’s going. Lally’s poems are among the most passionate I know, and he has a claim on being one of the most direct descendants of that other great Irish-American poet of the spirit, you know, the one who wrote, “Grace to be born and live as variously as possible.”

Lally has amazing crossover skills, which came forth in his artistic life in his ties to poets such as Bruce Andrews and Ray di Palma. The anthology Lally edited, *None Of The Above*, published in 1976, is exemplary for the way it brings together New York School and Language poets under the same covers.

Some of his Lally’s early short poems from the ‘70s give a sense of this crossover in the scene at large — and his place in it. Here is his entire poem “Happy Days”:

no more schoolboy luck
no more intuition gluttony
no more impulsive rags
just dope, some quiet lives,
not yours

And yet, Lally the poet is happiest when most expansive, and this is an ability he readily resides in.

When Bush and Company were playing their war drums in early 2003, we decided to do an anti-war poetry reading. It took place at the Paula Cooper Gallery on March 18, 2003, and featured Robert Creeley, Ann Lauterbach, and Anne Waldman, in addition to Lally. I asked Michael to participate because I knew of his political activism, and I had a hunch his street-smarts and poetic chops could result in some verbal dynamite we could hurl at the cracked-facade war-mongers. Lally didn’t disappoint. His tour-de-force poem, written for the occasion, rocked the house. A series of rhetorical questions, it gains cumulative power in its plaintive intelligence:

Didn’t we try to be honest?
But didn’t the truth keep changing on us?
When I was a kid, didn’t they teach us that
“Uncle Joe Stalin” helped us win the war?
When I was a man, didn’t
Ronald Reagan remember scenes from
war movies as if they really happened and he was there
though he was in Hollywood the entire time
making movies he remembered as reality?
In the light of his later disease
Don’t we understand that?
Don’t we understand everything, sometimes —
Or once?
...

I am very pleased to introduce Michael Lally as the final reader in this first year of the revived Readings in Contemporary Poetry series at Dia. Please welcome Michael Lally.