

Dia Art Foundation

Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Tuesday, December 2, 2014, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Paul Auster is the author of *Invisible*, *The Book of Illusions*, *In the Country of Last Things* and *The New York Trilogy*, among other works. His non-fiction books include *The Invention of Solitude*, *The Art of Hunger*, and *Hand to Mouth*. He has in recent years published the autobiographical works *Report from the Interior* (2013) and *Winter Journal* (2012), and the novel *Sunset Park* (2010). He edited *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* (1982) and has translated the work of Paul Éluard, André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Philippe Soupault and René Char, among others. Auster published several volumes of poetry in the 1970s; this work can be found in his *Collected Poems*, published by The Overlook Press in 2004.

There is, behind the clarity of Paul Auster's prose the limpity of his poet's voice. It is thought that the study of poetry aids prose writers in such areas as word choice, rhythm, assonance, etc. While this may be true, it obscures the fact that there are few fiction writers who are also poets. Paul Auster is one of these few. I don't mean in terms of published output but rather that the essence of poetry has always been at the basis of Auster's prose.

Auster will be reading from his *Winter Journal* tonight a section about watching a dance performance. I am impressed, in reading this passage by two things — one is his observation about music's role in providing narrative coherence and emotional tone, with its absence leading to abstraction, the second is his phrase "a physical joy that was also of the mind." Both observations seem entirely germane to the art of poetry.

He was writing poetry at that time and went on to write what he calls "a text of no definable genre." As much philosophical meditation as poem in prose, the work, entitled "White Spaces" (1979) opens up areas for contemplation in a way that few other contemporary works do. "A man sets out on a journey," he writes, "to a place he has never been before. Another man comes back." It was a transitional moment for Auster, and he came through it transformed. Tonight, he takes us back to that moment, to look at process and creation in his inimitable way. Please join me in welcoming Paul Auster to Dia.

Siri Hustvedt is the author of six novels: *The Blindfold* (1992), *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (2004), *What I Loved* (2004), *The Sorrows of an American* (2009), *The Summer Without Men* (2011) and *The Blazing World* (2014). She has also published three books of essays, *Mysteries of the Rectangle: Essays on Painting, A Plea for Eros, and Living, Thinking, Looking* (2012); a work of nonfiction, *The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves*; and a book of poems, *Reading to You* (1982). She was the recipient of the 2012 International Gabarron Prize for Thought and Humanities.

In her short essay, "Some Musings on the Word *Scandinavia*," Siri Hustvedt writes, "The vocabulary and cadences of Norwegian continue to live inside me, and moreover, they haunt my English. My prose is decidedly Protestant, and despite the fact that Scandinavia is no longer exclusively Protestant, its mores and culture were profoundly influenced by that iconoclastic, stark, and lonely version of Christianity." Hustvedt is someone who thinks deeply about language, about its abilities to expose and simultaneously conceal. Her passion for language and her attention to cultural detail is inspiring, especially as she reveals herself, in her published writing, to be intensely aware of the collage quality of all human experience.

The Blazing World, from which Hustvedt will be reading tonight, features a woman, an artist, also intensely aware of this collage quality, so much so that she embarks on the experiment of performing three male characters, creating their quite different art practices and then presenting them to the world. The form of this book as a work of art is also collage-based, as it is a compilation of texts of various authorship, within the world created by Hustvedt.

In addition to examining the preconceptions gender, among other tags, imposes, Hustvedt is fascinated by a netherworld where roles are not clearly defined, where definitions do not completely hold: a realm where hybridity reigns. An early poem of hers is entitled "Hermaphroditic Parallels." This concept re-appears in *The Blazing World*, in the expression, used to describe the female artist melding with her male persona: "a 'hermaphroditic self' . . . 'a mingled reality created between [the artist and her mask].'" Transgender concerns recur in a jazz musician born a woman who identifies and performs as a man. And then there is the cross-dressing Margaret Cavendish, described as: "Hermaphroditic polyphony," where "polyphony is the only route to understanding." This is a form of knowledge entirely fitting to our current moment, expressed in an art form that feels totally contemporary. Tonight we have the good fortune to be given a tour of this world by its author. Please help me welcome Siri Hustvedt to Dia.