

Dia Art Foundation

# Rae Armantrout and Lisa Jarnot

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

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## Introduction by Vincent Katz

### Lisa Jarnot

Lisa Jarnot was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1967. She studied with Robert Creeley at SUNY Buffalo (1992) and went on to earn an MFA from Brown (1994). Her first collection of poems, *Some Other Kind of Mission* (Burning Deck Press, 1996), was named an International Book of the Year in the *Times Literary Supplement*. She is the author of three other collections: *Ring of Fire* (Zoland Books, 2001 and Salt Publishers, 2003), *Black Dog Songs* (Flood Editions, 2003) and *Night Scenes* (Flood Editions, 2008). She co-edited *An Anthology of New (American) Poetry* (Talisman House Publishers, 1997).

*Ring of Fire* begins with an epigraph from Catullus' famous poem *odi et amo...* This quote is apposite, as Jarnot's poetry holds within it an intense awareness of both romantic and erotic pain, albeit these sensations are often tossed off with a disarming casualness. Many of her poems make use of repeating rhythmic structures and a refrain-like use of rhyme, yet these materials are not used for their own sake, but are in the service of an ambitious project, incorporating memory, personal longing, environmental complaint, and social awareness. Complaint is a persistent tone in Jarnot's poetry, a classic trope, which makes her a social, as well as a literary critic, but she leavens these grave burdens with humor. In "Ode" from *Ring of Fire*, she writes:

For let me consider him who pretends to be  
the pizza delivery man and is instead the  
perfect part of day, for the fact he is a medium,  
for the eight to twelve inches of snow he  
tends to be...

While often using the syntax of prose to reflect daily rumination, she introduces subtle shifts, which allow her to continue the rhythmic impulse of a piece until she chooses to close it.

There is also a consistent use of rhetoric, which Jarnot manages to take advantage of while simultaneously keeping it in check. "Hockey Night In Canada" brings to mind Kenneth Koch's use of apostrophe and subject matter to convey emotion. Even here, though, it is the linguistic distinction between "beside" and "between" that begins to carry the most weight, becoming the substance of what the poet uses to say what she wants to say.

What Jarnot wants to say is often directly and bluntly political, as in the group called "My Terrorist Notebook." Some of her poems seem like incantatory hymns or psalms. Her new poems are denser, more ancient, steeped in the lives of humans and animals. Behind it all, her voice is always musical and compelling. Please welcome Lisa Jarnot to Dia.

### Rae Armantrout

Rae Armantrout was born on April 13, 1947, in Vallejo, California, and grew up in San Diego. She attended San Diego State University and UC Berkeley, where she studied with Denise Levertov, graduating in 1970. She continued her studies at San Francisco State University. Armantrout is the author of eleven books of poetry, including her most recent publication, *Money Shot* (Wesleyan, 2011), and her 2009 collection, *Versed* (Wesleyan, 2009), which won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She was one of ten poets who co-authored the remarkable memoir *The Grand Piano: An Experiment In Collective Autobiography*. She is Professor of Poetry and Poetics at the University of California, San Diego.

"I wanted poems to ask real questions, to put things at stake. I still do," wrote Armantrout in her Introduction to her volume of *Collected Prose*, 2007. Most readers would agree that her poems do put essential things at stake, but how she achieves this is less clear. Part of her mastery is in the apparent effortless of her surfaces. She prefers words from everyday speech. She does not usually fracture

syntax, or insist on accruing meaning via parataxis.

Armantrout has written of the difference between collage and what she calls “faux-collage,” or the difference between found, or overheard, phrases, and those she composes from a received set of vernacular conventions. “My poems respond to everyday life by using happenstance,” she writes in “Everyday Life” in *The Grand Piano Part 4*, 2007. “...whatever happens by within a certain time frame can enter them. So they are penetrable, interrupted, and yet, I hope, they hang together somehow (sometimes). I start again and again from some unexpected sight or speech...The noise becomes the signal...”

An example of this is found in her poem “Speaking” (from *Up To Speed* 2004), where she writes:

No problem

And an infinite number  
of solutions

woman dressed as “Frank N Furter”  
from The Rocky Horror Picture Show

alone on the sidewalk, 9:30 a.m.,  
August 24, 2002.

There is an almost Frank O’Harian seeming-casualness to the detail, along with notational devices of time and cultural signs similar to O’Hara’s. What is different is how far Armantrout travels, in the space of a few lines, from these mundane beginnings.

In a generation of writers for whom non-referentiality was key, Armantrout is not afraid to lay it on the line, as they used to say, to let it all hang out. She might even use language like that, always bending it away, though, from where it began, its assumptions, to take it to a place at once more philosophical, more critical of the social and economic underpinnings of such daily detail, and also darker — darker in its sexual undertones and in its undertones of death, and decay.

In *Money Shot*, we feel the poet is going into ever stranger territory, even though the language she uses is still as accessible as ever. Tones of ease and equilibrium are turned, becoming not satisfying, but rather unnerving. Lack of improvement equals failure. The poet’s familiar wit is still with her, and us, but its wryness has a sting.

And yet, as she wrote in a prose piece entitled “The Lyric” in *The Grand Piano Part 8*, 2009, “I want to defend some version of the lyric...It gestures toward what’s left out; it participates in a dialogue with the unspoken. It emphasizes the boundary, the mysterious, arbitrary division between outside and in...” It is at that fascinating boundary that Rae Armantrout’s poetry holds us. Please welcome her to Dia.