

Dia Art Foundation

Robert Kelly and Anna Moschovakis

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Monday, December 16, 2013, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Anna Moschovakis is a poet, translator, and editor. Her most recent books are *You and Three Others Are Approaching a Lake*, a book of poems published by Coffee House Press in 2011, and *The Jokers*, a translation of a novel by Egyptian-French author Albert Cossery, published by New York Review of Books in 2010. She is the author of a previous book of poems, *I Have Not Been Able to Get Through to Everyone* (Turtle Point Press, 2006), and the translator of works by Claude Cahun, Blaise Cendrars, and Henri Michaux. Moschovakis teaches at Pratt Institute and in the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College. She is a longtime member of the Brooklyn-based publishing collective Ugly Duckling Presse, and she lives in South Kortright, New York.

Anna Moschovakis' poetry alternates between plain-spoken language and philosophy's erudition. Maybe she wants us to realize that the two are interchangeable. As such, her poems tend to look different. Some are small, chiseled clusters, while others feel like infinitely expandable collections of prosy sentences, which, however, sound like poetry, alerting the reader or listener to the poet's finely tuned ear. There is another alternation in Moschovakis' verse — between lofty ambition and almost abject humility. The artistry involved in these decisions and the creation of verse that seems so natural and seems to mimic the patterns of the human mind, is an impressive feat. Her poetry is at once eminently accessible and audaciously stylish. Even her titles often embody the forthright ambition of rock and roll. *I Have Not Been Able To Get Through To Everyone* could have been a Stone Roses album title, if they had been able to admit not having gotten through to everyone.

There is also something filmic, perhaps French, in her scenarios. Here is one from "Second Preparation":

Stop reading.
Better, isn't it?
Now that we're on heightened
ambivalence alert
I'd like to review the coming year.
One: a separation
two: a reconciliation
three: a separation
and so forth.

In *You And Three Others Are Approaching A Lake*, Moschovakis moves further into philosophy, taking up its burden in the branch called morals. "To be fed / To keep warm and dry" we read near the poem's beginning as a "procedure," but we know she means for us to understand it as more than that, as a basic need. That it should need to be mentioned at all is a stark reminder, a reality check, a perspective recalculation that Moschovakis is so adept at.

Much of *You And Three Others* involves the poet's navigating a sea of language, similar to the seas we all daily find ourselves surrounded by. That she is able to chart a course that is shapely, timely, expansive, realistic, and humorous, is an energizing achievement. Please help me welcome Anna Moschovakis to Dia.

Robert Kelly is the co-director of the Program in Written Arts at Bard College. His books of poems include *Kill the Messenger Who Brings Bad News* (1980), which received the Los Angeles Times First Annual Book Award, *Red Actions: Selected Poems 1960-1993* (1995), *Lapis* (2005), *May Day* (2007) *Fire Exit* (2009) and *Uncertainties* (2011). He was co-editor (with Paris Leary) of the anthology *A Controversy of Poets* (1965), and he has published several collections of essays and fiction. He has also written texts responding to work by a wide range of visual artists. Kelly lives in the Hudson Valley with his wife, the translator Charlotte Mandell.

In a note to his 2011 poetry collection, *Uncertainties*, Robert Kelly writes "Formally, the poem engages with one constraint: each line wants to be semantically intact — ideally, any line could stand alone, be my Last Words, my epitaph. Yet it also must link syntactically or narratively with the line that follows. And each stanza must stand in like relation with the stanzas before and after." As he goes on to note, this ability to connect — and disconnect — forwards and backwards has been emblematic of Kelly's poetry for some time. He long

ago freed himself from standard English sentence structure in favor of a more mobile, ranging unit. One is tempted to call it a musical unit of sorts, for Kelly links phrases as an oral poet would. In fact, I am going to claim that Kelly is our epic poet of non-narrative existence.

Since he was a boy, as he has stated in an interview, Kelly wanted poetry to be "open and expansive" and resistant to an artificially contrived closure. In his recent book-length projects, Kelly consistently tests his breath and proves himself up to the epic poet's twin tasks of grace and stamina. If epic, though, then what is the struggle, what do his heroes battle against or for? There is no answer, but perhaps a clue near the end of *Fire Exit*, when Kelly writes:

The conspiracy of silence
silenced him as usual, the sullen
angry father of the world

mortifying his son.
Each of us his only son.
There is a language though

where all this is not so,
a language that lets you go —
if he could learn it he would be free. . . .

For most poets, epic would be mode enough. Not for Kelly's voracious poetic desire, though. In his collection *Lapis* (2005), he shows he is a master of concise lyric as well. In a poem from *Lapis*, Kelly writes:

I'm the man who came about the language
to free it from coherence and confusion both,
free it from meaning and from meaningless.

Because language is a different ride,
a hunger strike against the tyrant mind. . . .
(from "Aurunculeia")

But this introduction would be incomplete were it not to mention the sensuality of Kelly's poetry, how the body is constantly invoked in its incursions on and from the spirit and mind. And in fact, in conjunction with his dissolving of syntactical boundaries via musical units, there is too a uniting of the various experiential realms in his poetry. Thus, a short poem from *Lapis* ends, "So the taste of blood in my mouth // Is the same as a word, / Language the first and last of all our wounds." There is much more to be said, but it is better to hear instead from the poet himself. Please join me in welcoming Robert Kelly to Dia.