

Dia Art Foundation

Ron Padgett and Thomas Devaney

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Monday, November 18, 2013, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Thomas Devaney was born in 1969 in Philadelphia. He earned his BA in English Literature at Temple University in 1993 and his MFA in Poetry at Brooklyn College, CUNY, in 1998. He is a poet, teacher, and editor. His books include two poetry collections — *The American Pragmatist Fell in Love* (Banshee Press, 1999) and *A Series of Small Boxes* (Fish Drum, 2007) — as well as the nonfiction book *Letters to Ernesto Neto* (2005). He is also the author of the brand-new collaborative book *The Picture That Remains* (The Print Center of Philadelphia, 2013). Devaney is the editor of ONandOnScreen, an e-journal featuring poems and videos. He teaches at Haverford College and lives in Philadelphia.

Thomas Devaney could be a lyric poet, but he is more of an attack poet. He attacks the moment, which puts him squarely in the tradition of Williams and Frank O'Hara. He is indebted to the visual arts, as those poets were, and projects his work into visual realms, most notably by his collaborations with artists. His remarkable new book, *The Picture That Remains*, pairs Devaney's poems with photographs taken by Will Brown. In this project, Devaney engages entirely with the worlds presented in the photographs, and he speaks from the inherited and imagined authority of worlds depicted:

Sitting at the counter, looking
back out the door, the street's
vacancy is demanding:
STOP. LOOK
AT YOUR SHOES.
REPAIR THEM NOW.
(from "The Picture That Remains")

I can imagine Thomas Devaney in another time and place as a barker, enticing us to enter the world of his poems by a mixture of wordplay, color-evocation and bravado. Or to put it another way, Devaney has stage presence, as do his poems. His poems are sure of themselves.

Early on, Devaney mastered the New York school art of combinatory discovery: "you reading Milton and eating a BLT" a formalist update of "I do this I do that." He had that brash language, but he composed thoughts in sensitive, unpredictable ways.

In his recent work, Devaney's pacing has gotten ever smoother, though the rough edges of the worlds he observes are as scratchy as ever. "Once in a row house garden there grew a shrub," he writes in "The Last Topiary," from *The Picture That Remains*. Devaney, by his word placement, is able to release the multiplicity of connotations in almost every word in that line, while maintaining a surface with the consistency of natural language. Then, he takes that simplicity into a darker place; he reaches for, and achieves, depth soundings of places we did not know existed. Please join me in welcoming Thomas Devaney to Dia.

Ron Padgett was born in 1942 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He received a B.A. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University in 1964. His poetry books include *How to Be Perfect* (Coffee House Press, 2008); *You Never Know* (Coffee House Press, 2002); *Great Balls of Fire* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969; rev. ed., Coffee House Press, 1990), and just out, his *Collected Poems* (Coffee House Press, 2013). He has translated Blaise Cendrars, Guillaume Apollinaire, Pierre Reverdy and others, and he has edited Edwin Denby's poems and Joe Brainard's writings. He has also published memoirs of Brainard and of Ted Berrigan. Padgett lives in New York City.

Ron Padgett is a master of minimalism. One of his early poems reads, in its entirety, "Jet Plane // Flies across sky". It is not only witty; it also true, and poignant. It is a modern, urban, image, and it carries in it the weight of implication by concision. Another poem from that period is perhaps more self-consciously modernist: a sonnet in which every line is identical, and identical to the title: "Nothing in that drawer. Nothing in that drawer..."

But Padgett has also been a master of the long poem from his early days, as his 18-page opus "Tone Arm" makes evident.

There is often an "I" in Padgett's poems, but it is often an arch, or literary, I, as in his poem "Birches":

When I see birches
I think of nothing
But when I see a girl
Throw away her hair and brains
I think of birches and I see them
One could do worse than see birches

And yet, Padgett is able to play almost endlessly with the audience's expectations of the narrator in his poems. He has commented that his writing process consists of starting somewhere and then letting his mind take the poem wherever it will. These unpredictabilities are what excite us in a Padgett poem. In "June 17, 1942," the narrator appears to be Padgett. The date is his birth date, he refers to his wife, son and friends by name. However, the poem, which at first appears to be deadly serious, then seems to be ironic in tone. This shifting back and forth is never resolved entirely, but in my opinion, it is where the poem leaves the reader or listener that counts with Padgett. He is a master of endings as much as he is of beginnings. In "June 17, 1942," he leaves us in the present, and the ultimate impression is serious after all! I would like to propose that Padgett, as well as being one of our most hilarious poets, is one of our most serious as well. Tonight, we have an opportunity to tune in to the multifarious Ron Padgett. Please set your receivers and help me welcome Ron Padgett!