

Dia Art Foundation

Ron Silliman and Robert Fitterman

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

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Introduction by Vincent Katz

Robert Fitterman was born in 1959 in a small suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, called Creve Coeur and has lived in New York City since 1981. He received a BA from University of Wisconsin at Madison and an MA from Temple University, both in English. Fitterman is the author of 12 books of poetry, including the long poem *Metropolis*, which has been published in four volumes. Other titles include *Leases*; *Among The Cynics*; *Ameresque: the snap wyatt poems*; *Rob the Plagiarist*; *now we are friends*, and *Holocaust Museum*. With Vanessa Place, he coauthored *Notes on Conceptualisms*. He teaches writing and poetry at New York University and at the Bard College Milton Avery School of Graduate Studies.

Robert Fitterman's early poems are lyric meditations, which, though clearly non-linear, stay in a fixed key. They are the music of a man who contemplates, who even, for all his apparent urbanity, might have a sense of the natural world about his language:

"Once it was
enough to portray you

tall et al —
accurate

now nothing
is."

("A Tree Among Trees" section IV)

In his compendium-poem *Metropolis*, published in sections over the last two decades, Fitterman attempts to catalogue many varieties of language — most of it found, overheard, or otherwise taken from the environment. The claim seems to be that all language — even that of poets who think they are writing in the first person — is taken, borrowed, but in *Metropolis*, Fitterman's early lyrical motivation is far removed. The city — as represented in *Metropolis* — is: fractured words, slurred thought, visual dissection, vocal elision, bibliographical gambit, absurd drama, Borgesian diversion, mall survey, deleted news...

One of his most recent books, *now we are friends*, enacts a process of surveillance, using the internet to reveal as much as possible about a particular person. The language that results is familiar, and in a sense, random, though one imagines Fitterman orchestrating it before committing it to paper. There are bios, interviews, friends, alter-egos, genealogies... It is all of the moment, and when the moment has passed, becomes fascinating documentation of the way we were three long years ago. Tonight, we may be experiencing an entirely new version of Robert Fitterman, so dynamic is his trajectory. It is a great pleasure to welcome him to read at Dia.

Ron Silliman was born in Pasco, Washington, in 1946, and raised in Albany, California, just north of Berkeley. He attended Merritt College, San Francisco State University, and the University of California at Berkeley, before dropping out to work in the prison movement in 1972. Later, he worked as a teacher, a college administrator, and executive editor of *Socialist Review*. He has written and edited over 30 books, including, most recently, *Wharf Hypothesis*. His poetry and criticism have been translated into 12 languages. He was a Kelly Writers House Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania in 2012, and the recipient of the Levinson Prize from the Poetry Foundation in 2010. Silliman's Blog reached its tenth anniversary at the end of August and has had over three and a half million visitors during that time. He currently lives in Chester County, Pennsylvania.

Ron Silliman has made from his ardent experiments an epic of contemporary poetry. I refer specifically to his over-1000-page tome, *The Alphabet*, a collection of 26 books, each taking a letter of the alphabet as the first letter of the one word composing its title. If one looks for the subject of this epic, however, it is not in an investigative study of place, nor in a guiding human impulse, still less in

ancient ideas of martial conquest and nation-building. On the contrary, Silliman's *The Alphabet* is a very personal quest, but personal within a spelled-out community, as each book, or chapter, of *The Alphabet* is dedicated to a fellow traveler in the attempt to find an uncompromised space for poetic experimentation.

"The hotel is responsible for pastries.
Orgasm is a consequence.
As to nouns lacking objects.
Volcano is the planet's sigh."

What a short excerpt does not show is the staying-power of Silliman's forays. He seems intent on including every possible subject, too, into his array of sentences. At first, many of the sentences seem to source from the imagination. And yet, much of *The Alphabet* is made of the stuff of daily life. In "Paradise," Silliman writes:

"The bicyclist lies in the sun on the grass. Nearby, sunbathers lie on towels, listening to cassette players through headphones. In the distance Oakland is smeared in the smog. In a dream we lay naked side by side and were no longer just friends. Paradise is garden. The city in the park. The city in the parking lot."

Dreams compose a part of *The Alphabet's* texture, including one hilarious one about taking a bath in the midst of an elegant party. Caterers appear near the beginning and end of *The Alphabet*, causing one to wonder what it is to cater to someone. Silliman's use of sentences, phrases, some found, others invented, has this effect: it causes us to re-think, re-see, re-hear, frequently with shocking directness, channeling a humanism and a personism we thought we should not have the right to expect.

Ron Silliman is famous for being the guru of the poetry blogosphere. He is much more than that. He is our great epic poet of daily life. Please join me in welcoming Ron Silliman to Dia.