

Dia Art Foundation

Taylor Mead and John Giorno

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, October 14, 2010, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Good evening and welcome! This is the very first reading in the revived Readings in Contemporary Poetry series. This series initially ran, under the direction of Brighde Mullins from 1987-2003 and became known during that period as a series that featured celebrated poets, both innovative and academic, doing retrospective presentations of their work. Today, we are picking up where that series left off, continuing a lot of the ideas and interests of that time, and adding some new ideas.

Dia curator Yasmil Raymond invited me to co-curate this series, and it has been a great pleasure to work with her. We would like to thank Barbara and Charles Wright and an anonymous donor for their generous support of this program. We would also like to thank Christine Hou, who helped us with the coordination of this program, and Patrick Heilman, for all his help putting this series together.

This series will depart somewhat from the previous model in that the readers will not be asked to present retrospectives of their work. On the contrary, they will be encouraged to do exploratory, experimental, presentations, which could include music, projections, theatrical elements, or anything the poet devises. That could also end up being a poet standing up and reading his or her recent work, which is also an experimental, exploratory undertaking. The other element we have decided on is to have a specific relationship between the two poets performing — not they necessarily already know each other before the reading, though in some cases that will be true, but rather that there be a generational difference. One reader who is at or near the beginning of his or her arc as a poet paired with another who has already attained an iconic status in the world of poetry, who, in the words of the Brazilian singer and composer Caetano Veloso, “already knows he is immortal.” We think this intentional dynamic will result in a very special relationship between the two performances, that will make them memorable for the audience, and for the performers as well. It will make vivid an essential component of poetic history: the diverse expressions of lineage.

Now, you are probably wondering: with Taylor Mead and John Giorno, which one is the emerging poet, and which one is iconic? Well, I could make an argument, that would not be entirely specious, that they are of different generations or half-generations — Taylor Mead began performing his poetry in the early 1950s, while John Giorno publishing his poetry in the 1960s. I could make the additional argument that both these poets are both iconic and emerging, where emerging means continually re-inventing one’s commitment to the art form, staying fresh and perpetually scandalous, bent on smashing the given standards of art and life. However, the fact of the matter is that we wanted to start off this series with a bang, and we wanted to present, as emblematic of this endeavor, two figures whose constant energy has been challenging and exciting audiences for decades. In particular, we wanted two people who stand for the commitment to the life of an artist, to being on the margins, always pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable — both formally and in terms of content. And we wanted to have a party! So we were delighted when both Taylor Mead and John Giorno agreed to perform in this inaugural event. John Giorno will read first, followed by Taylor Mead.

John Giorno

John Giorno was born in 1936 in Brooklyn and grew up in Roslyn Heights, New York. He graduated from Columbia University in 1958 and worked as a stockbroker, which is what he was doing in 1962, when he met Andy Warhol, becoming his lover and the subject of Warhol’s first film, *Sleep* (1963). Influenced by Warhol’s use of imagery from mass culture, Giorno developed a poetic based on seamless collage of found elements — with sources ranging from news articles of domestic tragedy, sales pitches, government propaganda, romance magazines, and hard-core porn. One of his early pieces, “Pornographic Poem,” from 1965, is a fantasy involving Cuban army officers that ends with the lines, “But with two/ big fat / Cuban cocks / up my ass / at one time / I was / in paradise.” During the ensuing years, Giorno became more and more involved in Tibetan Buddhism, and elements of this entered his mix of war, sex, death, vanity and hypocrisy. A darker tone, based on the acceptance of suffering and death, became a constant, although it was still balanced with a sense of humor. Giorno’s performative bent is as palpable on the page as it is when the poems are experienced aloud, often with a visual component. There is a visual aspect to the printed poems too, with their staggered columns of repeating phrases, that vividly reference states of doubt, or a lack of clarity. His shifts of tone are particularly effective. Always memorable to me is a recording by Giorno of his 1974 poem “Subduing Demons In America,” which begins floating down the Green River in Utah in a kind of ecstasy, and ends, “everyone is laughing at you / and making fun of you / they’re drunk and stoned and nasty / and they are drunk and stoned and nasty / and you’re surrounded / by this terrifying / freak show...” etc.

He founded Giorno Poetry Systems in the 1960s in order to use new technology for the dissemination of poetry. The records he produced were essential conduits allowing people to hear the actual voices and readings of Beat Poets, Black Mountain poets, New York School poets, John Cage, and others. One of his most innovative and influential projects was Dial-A-Poem, which Giorno produced in the 1960s and '70s.

He is the author of ten books of poems, including *Poems By John Giorno* (Mother Press, 1964), *Johnny Guitar* (Angel Hair Books, 1969), *Balling Buddha* (Kulchur Press, 1970), *Cancer in my Left Ball* (Something Else Press, 1973), *You Got to Burn to Shine* (Serpent's Tail/High Risk Books, 1994), and, his selected poems, *Subduing Demons In America* (Soft Skull Press, 2008).

William Burroughs referred to the "voices" as the true subjects of John Giorno's poetry. We present to you the voices of John Giorno.

Taylor Mead

Taylor Mead, in one of his short, pithy, epigram-like poems, writes, "I don't need assholes / to tell me who / Taylor Mead is." At the risk of being called an asshole, I'm going to tell you who Taylor Mead is.

Poet, performer, actor, and painter Taylor Mead was born in 1924, in Grosse Point, Michigan, to a well-to-do family. "My parents didn't hate me / they were just indifferent," he writes. "So I was raised by maids / You can imagine how indifferent they were." A master of timing and innuendo, Mead is able to imbue his poems with a timeless wit and the wisdom of one who has seen life from all angles.

Mead is always foremost a performer, and, while his poems exist with the utmost simplicity and grace on the page, much of his writing is written to be performed. One of his memorable book titles, an extremely rare book nowadays, is 1968's *Taylor Mead On Amphetamine And In Europe*, published by Boss Books. Mead published *Son Of Andy Warhol* in 1986 in the Hanuman Books series, and, most recently, *A Simple Country Girl* with Bowery Books in 2005.

A legend in underground film and theater in both San Francisco and New York, Mead starred, between 1963 and 1969, in numerous Andy Warhol films, including *Tarzan and Jane Regained ... Sort Of*, *Taylor Mead's Ass*; *The Nude Restaurant*; and *Lonesome Cowboys*. He wrote and starred in Rudy Burckhardt's film *Tarzam* (1969) and has appeared in films by Ron Rice, John Chamberlain, Robert Frank, Nick Zedd, Rebecca Horn, and Jim Jarmusch. He has also made a major impact in experimental theater. One of his genius performances was the lead in Frank O'Hara's *The General Returns From One Place To Another*, for which he won an Obie for the original production in 1964 and which has been reprised twice since then. He is the subject of William A. Kirkley's 2005 documentary *Excavating Taylor Mead*.

Unbelievably — and you really should go to these and support him there — he performs weekly at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York City, captivating audiences with his hilarious, wry, comments on sex, death, genius, and his own unique celebrity. His poetry is deceptive — faster than a drag queen's reads, Taylor Mead's one-liners have attained the classic stature of epigram. Please welcome Taylor Mead!