
mipoesias

Vincent Katz is a poet, translator, and critic. He is the author of eleven books of poetry, two books of translation, and his criticism has been published in numerous books, catalogues, and journals. He curated an exhibition on Black Mountain College for the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid and was the editor of *Black Mountain College: Experiment In Art* (MIT, 2002), reprinted in Spring 2013. He is the author of the book of translations, *The Complete Elegies Of Sextus Propertius* (Princeton, 2004), winner of the 2005 National Translation Award from the American Literary Translators Association, and he is the author of *Alcuni Telefonini*, a book of poems done in collaboration with painter Francesco Clemente (Granary, 2008). Katz is the publisher of the poetry and arts journal VANITAS and of Libellum books. He curates the Readings in Contemporary Poetry Series at Dia Art Foundation in New York City.

Photo Credit: Oliver Katz

Lou Reed 4

Wandering on the slab I
See my son who is
Not my son, floating, song
Captured them all, not poetry
But poetry was one of
Mix's torrent slab, concrete, once
A current glowed through, was
There for one culture, thread

At center's wisp, when dusk
Deafens light, hope inverts within
Walkers' known desire, focused one
Stage abrim with dark, rhythm's
Flick attained in huddle fork
Could you stop in euphoric
Middle, want drum's surge through
Strum's wrist, applicator, stock event

I thought of all that
Space expired through want and
Wanting, a crush to go
Be seen at the center
But even center moves back
Contracts to willingness rare feat
And I see you angry by
A wall, determined through sound



audio goes here

Interview with Vincent Katz

by Grace Cavalieri

Where are you sitting right at this moment? Please describe your surroundings.

I am sitting at my desk. Looking straight ahead, above my laptop screen, where I'm typing this, I see my wife, Vivien's, eyes looking not at me, but a little off to my left. In the painting, she has thick dark hair and rich dark eyes I've had the good fortune to spend much of my time looking into. To Vivien's right is a painting of a pond with geese in the foreground next to some rocks, while in the distance someone rows someone else, and further back a sailboat, dock, and cabin in the woods are visible. I love this painting, but days, or maybe even years, go by when I don't look at it as carefully as I just have. Perched on top of the painting is a photograph I look at often — it's of Vivien's aunt Marly, who was a second mother, or the sister I never had, to me. She used to stay with us for extended periods, visiting from Rio, where she was a star on TV and in the local street market. She signed her letters to me Marla Katz. I miss her a lot. In the photo, she's in Times Square at night. No other people are visible. A car passes slickly behind her. She turns with a red scarf flowing from her neck to cover her shoulder. She has a fierce look on her face, a look that says she is of the city, and yet she shows deference to its denizens. So far, I've only gone a few inches. You caught me at a dangerous moment for describing my surroundings.

The first senses of art for me were The Twist, The Soupy Sales Show, The Beatles on Ed Sullivan, and the film Mary Poppins.

Long before I could think about what a painting was, how and why someone would put paint on canvas, I was haunted by silent images, and I made up my own stories, my own ritualistic culture, to explain their meanings.

I could go on for days. But I feel that any description of where I am right now needs to take into account the tone of the images I seem to have surrounded myself by. It should probably include, too, the music I'm listening to — been on an Uncle Tupelo kick of late, plowing through all their recordings, at this moment "Nothing" from *Still Feel Gone*.

How old were you when you felt the first delicious sensation of color and form?

The first senses of art for me were *The Twist*, *The Soupy Sales Show*, *The Beatles on Ed Sullivan*, and the film *Mary Poppins*. I was around four years old for each of those. It seems necessary to include music in any account of my aesthetic experience, as, quite literally, the dance form of *The Twist* and the image impact of *The Beatles* were extremely visual and gave exquisite interpretations of the use of space. But also sound as form and color. *The Twist* is a sound that captivates: it is next to impossible to hear it and not feel one's pulse speed up, not feel a sense of optimism about the world. The same, of course, is true of *The Beatles*, only much more so. Just as Edwin Denby

describes Rudy Burckhardt's black-and-white photographs in terms of color, so *The Beatles*, on black and white television, projected colors that would come to fruition a few years thence. *Mary Poppins*, on the other hand, actually was in color, and it was transformative. The magic was believable, the songs and lyrics pertinent, and the acting sublime. It also, perhaps unconsciously, tapped into the British Invasion zeitgeist, albeit from a different angle. It provided the backdrop, let's say. But there is another environmental influence I would be remiss not to mention: growing up amid the images displayed on my father's paintings. Long before I could think about what a painting was, how and why someone would put paint on canvas, I was haunted by silent images, and I made up my own stories,

my own ritualistic culture, to explain their meanings.

Do you consider an art “critic” a friend to the creator of art or to the audience? Why do we need criticism?

I like the way this question is framed — that is, by the inclusion of the word “friend.” I have been thinking, as I walk through the snow, of the relationship between critic and curator. The word “curator” comes from the Latin, and it means someone who takes care of someone or something, who gives that person or thing’s best interests priority. This can involve so many aspects of living — from the physical care of objects, art works, manuscripts, books, to cataloguing, inventorying, documenting. Then, the next step, it seems to me, would be analyzing, and it is here that curating and criticism intersect. “Criticism” comes from the Greek word meaning to make distinctions. Criticism involves the ability to study carefully and discern, within a work or body of work, those characteristics that distinguish it from other similar works or bodies of work. Ultimately, we look to critics to make judgments, which readers, or listeners, can then respond to, positively or negatively, but hopefully with further intelligent, open, discourse. Having said all this, it should be clear that, in my opinion, the true critic is most definitely a friend to the artist and to the public. This is true, even when the critic makes judgments that are negative, provided such negative judgments are couched in a discourse clearly based on an understanding of the artist’s motivations, processes, and cultural contexts. Then, the critic is a further player in the game of art and life. He or she is taking the ball thrown by the artist and keeping it in play, reacting to that initial gesture. Without critical response, (and this includes the public’s response), the ball would simply fall to the ground, game over (for now).

What do you think about the physicist’s theory that light knows when we are looking at it?

I know that performers definitely know when someone is looking at them.

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in similar ways, while trying to invent some distinguishing qualities of their own. How it will be different will be that it will become harder and harder to deny the reality of mediated images, as their proliferation will increase. It will therefore become ever more pressing for artists, and the rest of humanity, to maintain a close contact with the rhythms and silences and visual experiences of the natural world.

What century do you wish you lived in to immerse in the art of that time? Please give particulars.

All times have their pros and cons, and we are so used to our own time that, if we were thrust

Describe the most beautiful spring morning you can remember and tell us its surrounds.

The most beautiful spring morning I can remember was when I was 14, because of the confluence of ages — you are young, and the world feels young. The temperature was mild, it was wet, and I remember the vividness of the Forsythia that you would suddenly see, even in downtown New York City, that felt like harbingers of a life to come.

In 100 years how will the art of painting be the same, and how will it be different?

I think that artists will always turn to the past, as much as they have to confront the changes of the present. I can't imagine a human culture, in which artists are oblivious to what other humans before them have done. Thus, I believe that in 100 years artists, and those interested in art, will still travel the world to see great works of art in the flesh in situ. Having seen those works, they will then be inspired to work

into another time, we would probably immediately insist on being returned to our own. But, having said that, there are definitely times that intrigue me. I think I would have liked the 1950s/1960s transition. There is a big part of me that wants to throw over all conventions, and I would love to have been there for the three-martini lunches, cocktails and wine at dinner, in the context of intense artistic camaraderie, rivalry and insanity. Likewise, the '60s revolution is something that I relate to a lot, with its deep roots in ancient human ritual and its new aesthetic inventions, primarily from popular culture. I'd also feel at home in ancient Rome, provided I had the role of a poet with a reasonable patron. It was an arbitrary, violent existence, but it was one that could be highly stimulating intellectually and also quite open in terms of social mores.

Does all worthwhile art eventually get discovered in time?

Unfortunately, no, unless you define "worthwhile" as that work that has actually engaged an audience. There are many examples of artists whose work was not able to engage an audience. That's why the work of critics and curators (and keep in mind, anybody can serve as a critic or curator) is so important. The prime goal of the critic, in my opinion, should be to bring to light underknown artists and previously underappreciated aspects of an artist's work, by re-contextualizing it. This definition of criticism functions even for extremely well-known artists.

How do you feel about commerce using art as capital and as virtual currency, in its buying and selling of properties?

I feel that to criticize the art market one must criticize the market economy in general. Art works serve the same function in market terms as houses, horses, cars, and refrigerators. But your question is more about speculators. I find their actions venal and unscrupulous, but you can't really remove them from the situation, unless you want artists to go back to being dependent on the largesse of patrons, and I don't think you will find any artist who would like to do that. In the meantime, we can hope for enlightened collecting and support of all the

arts. This kind of activity overlaps with, is affected by, intelligent criticism and curating.

What should we be grateful for?

A lot. Life, this moment, love, kindness, a nearby animal, trees, the hand of the person you love. Look at that, and feel that. That is an amazing gift.

What is your definition of "esthetics?"

Esthetics is an unspoken cultural contract. It is how we deal with one another at the deepest level.

How do you allow language to serve you in composing poetry?

That's a good question. I don't think of it as serving me, however, but hopefully that I serve it. That is, I try to be as sensitive as I can to the ramifications of individual words and their combinations. It is with this goal in mind that I devote a significant amount of time to studying languages — partially as a way of seeing how they impact our own language, often in covert ways. Again, I don't feel that I allow language to do anything, but that rather, at the moment I begin writing, I am being allowed — by the language, by my culture, by other artists — to play with language, to work with it. And then, I can impose my own interventions, some low-key, others quite obvious, as in a series of poems I've written that dispense with syntax altogether. I seem to go back and forth with syntax. At times, I like to see how far I can go in avoiding its strictures, while at other times I am drawn back into my love for common speech, emulating that, and at other times, I try to write poetry in language that is syntactical, but simultaneously avails itself of some of the verbal, and therefore moral, subtlety I've been hinting at. And sometimes — not as much recently, though I can feel the tendency might be returning — I will go for a really blunt, accessible, statement.