

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Jen Bervin and Bernadette Mayer

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Dia:Chelsea
535 West 22nd Street, 5th Floor
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Introduction by Vincent Katz

Jen Bervin is, to quote from her well-worded website, a visual artist and poet whose research-driven interdisciplinary works weave together art, writing, science and life in a complex yet elegant way. Her work explores the intersection of text and textiles in acts of reading, writing, and listening through the lens of traditional craft and cutting edge technology. She has published ten books, including *Nets* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2004), *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems* (New Directions / Christine Burgin, 2013, with Marta Werner) and *Silk Poems* (Nightboat Books, 2017). *Silk Poems* was composed in collaboration with Tufts University's Silk Lab, in a manner I hope she will tell us more about.

Jen Bervin's work is multifarious. If you even wanted to, you couldn't pin it down to one discipline, let alone a genre or way of thinking about the world. Though there is a way of thinking that ties Bervin's work together. Part of that is discipline in itself, a way of examining material that will appeal to her, then devoting months or years of study and application, at which point her experiments produce results that she collects in whatever form seems appropriate.

Her 2004 book *Nets* took all of Shakespeare's sonnets, and printed them, greyed out, except select words and phrases chosen by Bervin. *Silk Poems* is a different prospect, visually, poetically. An author's note states it is written from the perspective of a silkworm, and yet, it can be read from any number of vantage points.

There's a lot of knowledge, a lot of healing in this work. I have to believe that Bervin's labor-of-love revealing and transcribing of Emily Dickenson's letter-poems has informed her own poetry in *Silk Poems*. The visual statement – all capital letters, all words in a line joined together – is paramount. There is a large hush present, and it informs how you read these poems:

ITHOUGHT
YOUSHOULD

KNOW
HOWITIS

WITH
THE

CREATURES
WHOMADETHIS

A whisper of water. A blend of textures. Please join me in welcoming Jen Bervin to Dia.

Bernadette Mayer is the author of over twenty-seven collections of poetry including *Memory* (North Atlantic Books, 1976), *Studying Hunger* (Adventures in Poetry/Big Sky, 1976), *Midwinter Day* (1982, Turtle Island Foundation; New Directions, 1999), *Sonnets* (Tender Buttons 1989; 2014), *A Bernadette Mayer Reader* (New Directions, 1992), *The Desire of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (Hard Press, 1994; Split Level Texts/Nightboat Books, 2017), *Another Smashed Pinecone* (United Artists Books, 1998), *Poetry State Forest* (New Directions, 2008), *The Helens of Troy* (New Directions, 2013), *Eating the Colors of a Lineup of Words: The Early Books of Bernadette Mayer* (Station Hill Press, 2015), and *Works and Days* (New Directions, 2016). With Vito Acconci, she edited the journal *0 to 9*, and, with Lewis Warsh, she edited United Artists books and magazine. From 1980 to 1984, she served as the director of the St. Mark's Poetry Project. Mayer was the recipient of the 2014 Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America.

Bernadette Mayer's poetry has been with us and been accorded the status of hugely influential for so long, and her body of work is so voluminous, that it is almost difficult to find a way to talk about it. That comes from a quality in the work itself. It is large, even when it is not written in large blocks of text. And its largeness can seem to render it impervious to analysis. Some of it, too, is that Mayer, for all her assiduous scholarly pursuits, has often worked to present language within the context of the non-analytical mind. Some of her earliest poems look like lyric poems on the page, but they are not. They are weird, quirky, fragmentary takes, embodied with human, feminist, grit.

She has worked from the minimal to the maximal, and everywhere in between. She has mined the classics, particularly the spicy parts, and she has remained fervently non-literary, in works devoted to anything going on any day inside or outside a house, probably the house of a bohemian, anarchist-leaning, avant-garde artist, but back in the day, that was a common enough type. These days, the commitment to living one's life outside the bounds of normal society – in language, in life choices, in what the poet chooses to highlight, or observe – resounds even more significantly.

A short poem in *Works and Days*, "I Am a Coyote," reads, in its entirety:

On the go
I'll fool you
Into thinking
You're one too
Who's to say
I can't do it?

Not I. And I'm guessing, not you. Please help me welcome Bernadette Mayer to Dia.