

Dia Art Foundation

Susan Howe and Kate Colby

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Monday, February 11, 2013, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Kate Colby was born in Boston in 1974 and grew up in Wayland and Gloucester, Massachusetts. She received a BA in English and French Literature from Wesleyan University and an MFA in Writing from California College of the Arts in San Francisco. Colby is author of four books of poetry, including *Fruitlands* (Litmus Press, 2006), which won the Poetry Society of America's Norma Farber First Book Award in 2007, *Unbecoming Behavior* (Ugly Duckling Press, 2008), *Beauport* (Litmus Press, 2010) and *The Return of the Native* (Ugly Duckling Press, 2011). In 2013 Colby was awarded a fellowship from the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts. She is a founding board member of the Gloucester Writers Center, where she runs a quarterly poetry series. She lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island.

Kate Colby's poetry draws from local histories — based mainly on personal experiences in New England — but equally from interior landscapes. Her histories are not literal, and one does not find them sprinkled with proper names and dates. Rather, her approach is lyrical; the rhythms and sounds of words keep her voice afloat amid emotional turbulence only hinted at. Her framing titles and notes give readers contexts, and those contexts — for example, the lavish fantasy house known as Beauport in Cape Ann — reward study and personal experience by the reader. But the contexts are only entry points into the rich, imaginative, world of Colby's poetic.

In "A Banner Year," an early poem, she wrote,
The Captain's Platter
cobble to the tavern
of scuppered casks
and scuttlebutts

Apart from the music, or inside the music, these words send us scuttling to the dictionary, where we find that "scuttlebutt" comes from a water butt, or container, on the deck of a ship. And that one meaning of "scuttle" coincides with one of "scupper" — to cause to sink. So that "scuppered casks" and "scuttlebutts" may in fact mean the same thing in the realm of logos. But there is always more in Colby's poetry. And that more is the contemporary, in which butts are more than casks of water.

Colby has been an innovator in book-length poems, where she is able to keep a balance between subject matter, always elusive, and form, supple and rhythmic enough to maintain continuity. Phrases sound like and suggest other phrases, and she is always working the suggestiveness of possibility in words, as in this stanza from "Unbecoming Behavior":

Let that hat wear you, and them
come to you. May it always be
your stunning debut — where it ends
you begin. Stay out of the wings
and the will-call.

Not the role-call, or the curtain-call, but the will-call, where the contemporary term (related to wings and debut) also suggests the timeless, in that it brings the sense of the will to bear, and how much will it takes to be so in the poem. Please help me welcome Kate Colby to Dia.

Susan Howe was born in Boston in 1937 and grew up in Cambridge. She graduated from the Boston Museum School of Fine Arts in 1961 and moved to New York in 1964 as a visual artist. She lived and worked in the milieu that included, among many others, Carl Andre, who will be the subject of a major exhibition at Dia next year. Soon, Howe began making artist's books. About these first books, she has written, "I would get a sketchbook and inside I would juxtapose a picture with a list of words under it. The words were usually lists of names. ... I relied on some flash association between the words and the picture or charts I used." (*Contemporary Literature*, 1995). She saw a connection between the work of Robert Smithson and Charles Olson and "their interest in archeology and mapping...how it's connected to memory, war and history." She became more and more drawn to "the problems of those words on the

page" and thus began to write.

Howe has published over 20 books of poetry, including *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979* (New Directions, 1996), *The Europe Of Trusts* (New Directions, 1990), *Singularities* (Wesleyan, 1990), *The Midnight* (New Directions, 2003), *Souls of Labadie Tract* (New Directions, 2007), and *THAT THIS* (New Directions, 2010). Howe is also the author of two books of criticism, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Wesleyan, 1993) and *My Emily Dickinson* (North Atlantic Books, 1985; New Directions, 2007). Howe has received numerous honors and awards for her work, including the 2010 Bollingen Prize for American Poetry and a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. She taught for many years at the State University of New York-Buffalo, where she held the Samuel P. Capen Chair of Poetry and the Humanities. She lives in Guilford, Connecticut.

Susan Howe is known for verse that makes use of a multiplicity of genres and disciplines, privileging none over the others. Her work draws on intensive historical study — often of locales in which she has lived — which she then subverts, or personalizes, by drawing attention to the failures, as well as the deep textures, of language. Autobiographical on a personal and also a national level — where the nation can be Ireland, the U.S., or Native American nations — Howe works with solid facts of word and image, composing them on the page.

From her earliest published works, Howe has mapped out a relationship of past to present, of prose to poetry, of documentation to imagination, within a poetics inherited from modernist forebears. That she has been able to innovate within that poetics is due largely to her awareness of her position as a woman within a largely male tradition, both historical and poetic.

"I was always going to be an artist though the art form changed." Howe wrote in *The Difficulties* (1989). The art form, we could say, changes. It shifts back and forth — always poetry, always visual, always sound. The perceiver changes as it changes her or him. Space on the page is specific, and Howe's readings reflect acute awareness of that specific weight or weightlessness.

There is a great understanding in these poems, even of opposing positions. Often, that understanding is expressed through difficulty, perhaps a mirroring of it. In *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe writes, "Every poet is salted with fire. A poet is a mirror, a transcriber." Occasionally, though, a less refracted voice appears, as in the ending of Howe's long poem "*Chanting At The Crystal Sea*" (1975):

I see my father approaching
from the narrow corner of some lost empire
where the name of some great king still survives.
He has explored other lost sites of great cities
but that vital condition —
the glorious success of his grand enterprise
still eludes him.

Maureen Owen has written of Howe, "Listening to her read is like staring into a lake enchanted mesmerized drawn closer and closer until the tip of the nose touches water & then swiftly one senses danger danger a warning a voice saying No, no wrong way not the lake not the lake over here & yes she's over there now & the magnetic pull begins again."

The pulls are about to begin. Please welcome Susan Howe back to Dia.