In 1961, when Susan Howe graduated from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston with a degree in painting, the big news in art was the imminent death of art, or at least the death of painterly abstraction that had come to preside. Howe had every intention of being an artist. She moved to New York, touched the tarbush of bohemia, read the whole fraternity of artists’ writings—Ad Reinhardt, Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, etc.—made books of lists and images, and wall installations with illustrations, photographs, found text, and original verse. By the time her friend, the poet Ted Greenwald visited her studio, she was arranging only words on walls. At his insistence—“You have a book on a wall, why don’t you just put it into a book?”—Howe dismantled and sequenced her pages as *Hinge Picture*, her first book of poems. Taking title and epigraph from Marcel Duchamp’s *Green Box*, Howe defined this delay as a form that operates both “in the plane” and “in space.”

This exhibition is no different, really. It is a hesitation toward the imminent fact of publishing. The poem, TTT, was commissioned for our little way station, but with the foregone conclusion that it would later be paginated, printed, and published in quantity. But enough with motives; I don’t favor the full-control formula, and Howe is apprehensive about the particular havoc a space on the game board can cause a work of art. Her poem has to defend its own ambiguity. “Perception of an object,” as she writes, “means loosing and losing it. Quests end in failure, no victory and sham questor. One answer undoes another.”

This is not a moment for making analogies—Howe’s poems are like drawings are like notations are like collages. No. They are poems. But if you write poems that are structured the way a piece of glass is when dropped from a great height, you probably mean something different by the word “poem” from what most people mean. Whatever poetry may prove to be, Howe’s is a material construction. And whereas most poets deposit words with an eyedropper, Howe cuts them out of other people’s mouths with a pair of scissors. But there is no sin about that. Poetry is innately related to theft. The lyre was invented, the Greeks tell us, by Hermes, who then gave the instrument to Apollo as compensation for stealing cattle.

“Archives, the material—the fragment, the piece of paper—” Howe says, “is all we have to connect with the dead.” Howe, like all library cormorants, carries within herself a world made up of all that she has seen and read, and it is to this world that she returns, incessantly. She haunts archives, marginalia, manuscripts, the paratextual particulars of print, and cuts up her *research*, far too deliberate a term, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. (Violence underwrites her act.) Coleridge then Browning then Yeats—a succession, orderly enough. Then a slice of Spinoza, a folk tale, some children’s babble, Paul Thek, a definition, a gap, some eccentric punctuation. While writing with other people’s words can be a glib game that preempts feeling, Howe’s references,
Sources used by Howe in the construction of her new poem are indicated in the bibliography with a *. Inspired by Susan Howe’s experience of viewing various manuscripts, sermon notebooks, books, and pamphlets of the eighteenth century American Calvinist theologian Jonathan Edwards in the vast collection of Edwards family papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in New Haven, Connecticut. Especially by the folder in Box 24 titled “Wetmore, Hannah Edwards, 1713–1773, Diary, 1736–39, copy in the hand of Lucy Wetmore Whitelsey, with commentary/n.d.” Using multi-purpose copy paper, scissors, “invisible” scotch tape, and a canon copier pc170 she collaged fragments of this “private writing” with a mix of sources from other conductors and revealers in the thick of things—before.
invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation. One does NOT get MUST IMPOSSIBLY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, in a manner, to be free of the burden of ground, freed of definition by others, freed of singularity, freed of language, freed of the necessity to be so or to be freed, freed of history, and is exhilaration. But it is impossible and dowsed. Howe knows that the primordial (that "lost prelapsarian stage") "may have only existed in the mind" (Arenas avant at self at all; that we all suffer violent "primal exile from the mother" (Howe, Emily Dickinson, 1979), and that we can never escape "that language outside language we are all entangled in" ("Women’s").

—Robert Henry Crabb, Diary.


Lady Macbeth: O proper stuff!

(The Act III Scene IV)


They said they said. They said they said when they said men. Many men many many many many men men said many here.


Is there a poem that never reaches words?

And one that chacons the time away?

Is the poem peculiar and general?

There’s a meditation there, in which there seems to stick. Stammer. To hold back in and hesitation. HESITATE from the Latin, invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation. One does NOT get MUST IMPOSSIBLY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, in a manner, to be free of the burden of ground, freed of definition by others, freed of singularity, freed of language, freed of the necessity to be so or to be freed, freed of history, and is exhilaration. But it is impossible and dowsed. Howe knows that the primordial (that "lost prelapsarian stage") "may have only existed in the mind" (Arenas avant at self at all; that we all suffer violent "primal exile from the mother" (Howe, Emily Dickinson, 1979), and that we can never escape "that language outside language we are all entangled in" ("Women’s").

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Kind of Sub-Title
Delay in Glass
Use “delay” instead of “picture” or “painting”; “picture on glass” becomes “delay in glass”—but “delay in glass” does not mean “picture on glass”—
It’s merely a way of succeeding in no longer thinking that the thing in question is a picture—to make a “delay” of it in the most general way possible, not so much in the different meanings in which “delay” can be taken, but rather in their indiscernible reunion “delay”—a “delay in glass” as you would say a “poem in prose” or a spittow in silver

Preface

Given
1. the waterfall
2. the illuminating gas,

one will immediately we shall (determine) the conditions for the instantaneous State of Rest (or allegorical appearance) of a succession [of a group] of various facts seeming to necessitate each other under certain laws, in order to isolate the sign the of accordance between, on the one hand, this State of Rest (capable of innumerable eccentricities) and, on the other, a choice of Possibilities authorized by these laws and also determining them.

For the instantaneous state of rest — bring in the term: extra-rapid

We shall determine the conditions of [the] best expose of the extra-rapid State of Rest [of the extra-rapid exposure (= allegorical appearance), of a group . . . . . . etc.

Note: This was reprinted by Marcel Duchamp in February 1927. GIMI
The Pendo femelle
is the form
in ordinary perspective
of a Pendo femelle
for which one could perhaps
try to discover
the true form

This comes from the
fact that any
form is the perspective
of another form
according to a certain vanishing point
and a certain distance

Perhaps make
a hinge
picture.
(folding yardstick, book . . .)
develop
the principle of the hinge
in the displacements
1st in the plane and in space
find an automatic description
of the hinge

    perhaps introduce it
    in the Pendo femelle
occluded as they are, do not present themselves simply for intellectual applause. What a low and idle thing citation would be if it were to lead us to negate mystery and art.

Howe’s work cannot be conditioned to act by a cause other than itself. It remains open. And, after all this time, I can still be surprised by something new I find in it, or I can be comforted by a familiar circuit of thought. I am glad for this. But faced with the unenviable task of introducing her to you, I must stay close to Howe’s obsession—erasure, and the way enclosures, be they archives, books, methodologies, or forms of speech—domesticate information and marginalize voices as liminal and wild. It’s an issue that covers a much wider range than gender or medium. And Howe takes it up directly, ignoring the divide between the makers of things, and those who critique and historicize that which is made. Her work does away with the specious worm that criticism is inferior to creation.

I would be very disappointed in a future which is going to tell us which things are worth something and which aren’t, that didn’t treat her considerably. But there isn’t much to worry about. Howe’s work is its own log book. The way we referee the past, the way individuals read books, and events, and people, not in the way they are intended, or in the way of some distantly omniscient observer, but in the idiosyncratic way that we must—this is a basic point to which Howe returns. More simply, historical records do not represent, they arbitrate. “Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence?”

Susan Howe was born in 1937. This is her first solo exhibition. Apart from her poetry, she is the author of two landmark books of literary criticism, *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, and three records with David Grubbs. Howe received the 2011 Bollingen Prize for American Poetry and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She has been a Stanford Institute for Humanities Distinguished Fellow, as well as an Anna-Maria Kellen Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin. She taught for many years at the State University of New York-Buffalo. She lives in Guilford, Connecticut.