

W. SCOTT HOWARD

## Archives, Artifacts, Apostrophes: Susan Howe's *Spontaneous Particulars*

*Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, by Susan Howe.  
New York: Christine Burgin / New Directions, 2014.

This is a book of gifts, wonder, and poetry of the highest order dwelling within everyday acts and materials of attention, intuition, motion, sound, texture, and vision. *Spontaneous Particulars* offers a potent synthesis of Susan Howe's dynamic genius: an exquisite homage to the quest for rigorous beauty thriving in wildernesses sheltered within archives; to the collaborative work required for such vital preservation and public engagement; and ultimately to the pursuit of what escapes capture, conformity, and conversion. In an age of radical transformations for libraries, Howe's "collaged swan song to the old ways" (9) celebrates the necessary angels of serendipity and synergy at the heart of creativity and research. Each page is a poem of liminal image/text transformations of archives, artifacts, and apostrophes on the verge of oblivion, "'Emerging / from / an / Abyss / and / entering / it / again'" (18); each poem limns "'drawers and drawers full of drawings'" (19) arranged in appositional glimpses "'or swim / of things'" (62) along "'peripheries of light / - / doom / etc / -'" (78). As the above allusions and quotations respectively intimate, the works of William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Hannah Edwards Wetmore, and Hart Crane shape some of the innumerable intra- and intertextual portals across collections and centuries in Howe's threshold poetics *here*.

*Spontaneous Particulars* draws upon decades of Howe's reading, writing, and teaching to combine prose, paratexts, and photographs in a festival of collaborative research, discovery, and poetic making. This book is classic Howe, and yet radically characteristically singular: "originally conceived as a lecture" accompanied by a "slide-show presentation" (9), this mesmerizing tychic performance animates "an occult invocation of verbal links and forces" encountered in "research libraries and special collections" where "words and objects come into their own and have their place again" (59). *My Emily Dickinson* (1985),

*The Birth-mark* (1993), *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), *That This* (2010), *Sorting Facts* (2013), and *TOM TIT TOT* (2014), for example, also emerge from integrated contexts of Howe's scrupulous-aleatory research, avant-gardist scholarship, and visionary poetics. And *Pierce-Arrow* (1999), *The Midnight* (2003), and Jen Bervin's and Marta Werner's *The Gorgeous Nothings* (2013)—to which Howe contributes a preface—are kindred image/text archival volumes that echo Howe's telepathic synechism here, but *Spontaneous Particulars* conveys a more direct and most stunning treatment of autonomous kinetic artifacts collaged in facing-page sequences of astonishment and chance pareidolia. Here, we find ourselves immersed in a kaleidoscope of Howe's discoveries reconfigured from a slide-lecture more like a documentary of a gallery exhibition where we are invited to explore and co-create at random amidst the interplay of light and shadow, text and context, sound and silence, figure and ground & etc. "This is not a moment for making analogies—Howe's poems are like drawings are like notations are like collages. No. They are poems" (Anon.). Each page is a *w-h-o-l-e* poem of eccentricities; each poem, an apostrophe—"To reach is to touch" (60)—from boundaries between noumena and phenomena: "Things-in-themselves and things-as-they-are-for-us" (18). Howe simultaneously illumines and obscures the crescent—"some parenthesis which darkens the sense" (46)—between archival remediation and artifactual irremediableness, folding and unfolding the seams / seems.

This curatorial assemblage of "visual and verbal textualities and textiles" (21) amplifies the vibrant materiality of artifacts—particulars spontaneous—that call upon our intuitive pursuit of their ciphers and decipherings mediated through archives "by mystic documentary telepathy" (18) thereby revealing "a literal and mythical sense of life hereafter—" (25). Howe's spiritual quest is, in fact, paramount in all that she does—from her minimalist visual art in the late 1960s to her image / text broadsides from the early 1970s to her first published collection of poems, *Hinge Picture* (1974), to her soundscapes performed and recorded with David Grubbs (*Thiefth*, 2006, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, 2007, *Frolic Architecture*, 2011, *WOODSLIPPERCOUNTER-CLATTER*, 2015)—and that keen attunement sparks her reverential agency in *Spontaneous Particulars*: "When you see the material objects, in all their variety of shapes and surfaces, it's like coming on unexplained spirits singing into air" (McLane). If Susan Howe's favorite word is *k-n-o-w* because "What you *can't* know now is also *present* in the way you sound [no] in English" (Halley), then *Spontaneous Particulars* documents perceptible imperceptibilities (*kataphasis/apophasis*) among, between, and within artifacts and archives.

This volume may offer, for some readers, a first point of contact with Hart Crane's typescripts, or Rebekah White's embroidery, or Gertrude Stein's handwriting, or Noah Webster's miscellaneous notes, extracts, and quotations—among many other unique materials imaged with remarkable clarity. Notwithstanding the sensuousness of these multifarious artifactual encounters, the practical magic in *Spontaneous Particulars* resides in the realm of the tangible/intangible split second when the senses are synaesthetically transfigured. "Each collected object or manuscript is a pre-articulate empty theatre where a thought may surprise itself at the instant of seeing. Where a thought may hear itself see" (24). The wild ephemerality here lives in the immanent/imminent realm of wonder and vulnerability before recognition, on the verge of conversion (in every sense of the word):

Often by chance, via out-of-the-way card catalogues, or through previous web surfing, a particular "deep" text, or a simple object (bobbin, sampler, scrap of lace) reveals itself *here* at the surface of the visible, by mystic documentary telepathy. Quickly—precariously—coming as it does from an opposite direction.

If you are lucky, you may experience a moment *before*. (18)

These lines articulate the manifold playful wagers in each page of *Spontaneous Particulars*: that the 30+ photographic images might witness artifacts traveling at their own velocities on their several journeys; that the accompanying prose poems might intimate yet not interpret the collection's inherent field of tropological action; that the credits and endnotes might similarly document without defining these ecstatic relationships between archives and artifacts; that the numerous highly charged erasures, gaps, silences, blank spaces, unnumbered pages, and undocumented materials might invoke the reader's imaginative co-creative engagement; that each page might propel revolving doors among micro-, macro-, and meta-archives. *Spontaneous Particulars* is an open work of "material details" and embedded apostrophes (in every sense of the word) signifying present-absent possessives living still amidst "twill fabrics, bead-work pieces, pricked patterns, four-ringed knots, tiny spangles, sharp-toothed stencil wheels; in quotations, thought-fragments, rhymes, syllables, anagrams, graphemes, endangered phonemes, in soils and cross-outs" (21).

*The Library* section from Howe's favorite of the "separate limited editions" (33)—Book Three (1949)—of Williams's *Paterson* looms large here: "a Romantic literary Pietist enters the library in the hope of unraveling tangled skeins of evidence. Paterson (he has named himself for his city) rifles through old newspapers and local histories with their genteel accounts of celebrations, picnics, suicides—" (34). Howe's whirlwind poetics emulates the "fire of poetic artifice" (39) from Paterson's library—"Whirling flames, leaping / from house to house, building to building /// carried by the wind /// The Library is in their path /// Beautiful thing! aflame ./// a defiance of authority" (39)—and strikes at least one reflection upon the "acquisitive violence, the rapacious 'fetching' involved in [specialized] collecting" (43), but the glow of Howe's "eye of loving" is a recollective "force for mercy" (51) amidst these fragments and animalcules striking inland again (toward Guilford and New Haven) to begin again. She avers: "Reading *Paterson* reminds me of walking barefoot across a small strip of common land near my house that's littered with beach glass, broken oyster shells, razor clams and kelp" (37).

Howe gestures that she will "begin" *Spontaneous Particulars* "with the marvelous opening" (9) from *The Library*, having, of course, already begun our archival tour with the book's cover photograph (4477) by Thomas Smillie (c. 1890), which stages a drama of *toujours-déjà/jamais vu*. Here, we find one of Smillie's 'specimens' before Duchamp's readymades. Howe presents this impromptu vernacular composition without commentary, thereby investing Smillie's blue daguerreotype with tropological potential for connections without connectives elsewhere and otherwise, such as: drawers like sentences (19), fabrics like knotted skeins of quotations (31), glimpses of C. S. Peirce's doodled "'dingy blue'" (36) and of Crane's pencil-blue annotation, "'doubt / ful'" (61). Between the cover and Howe's preface (9) we find an appositional cluster of artifacts limning apostrophes to violence and mercy on the threshold of survivance—Jonathan Edwards, Jr.'s prayer in Mahican (c. 1765), which Howe documents simultaneously in four remediations: one photographic image on page 6; one italicized typographic transcription (with Kenneth Minkema) on page 7; one translation into English (by Carl Masthay) on page 71; and one contextual endnote also on page 71. These opening / closing materials reverberate hauntingly alongside the volume's disjunctive presentation, in the concluding pages, of kindred artifacts: a transcription of Webster's notes for the word "Transport" placed before (64) and after (67) a double-sided photographic reproduction (65–66) of the manuscript fragment; a transcription (78) from Crane's work sheet for the "Cape Hatteras"

section of *The Bridge* (c. 1925); a note on Webster's notes (79); and a quotation from Captain John Smith's *The Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624). Such micro-, macro-, and meta-archival juxtapositions animate each and every page in *Spontaneous Particulars*, shaping the volume's conditions for serendipity and synergy from cover to cover. "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" (Anon.).

Howe's works relentlessly problematize chronology, destabilizing origins and endings with a regenerative kairotic indeterminacy—that is: "BETWEENNESS. Always, always, always between. Always between" (Howe, "Re: Edited Transcription"). *Spontaneous Particulars* emerges vividly from a series of slide-lectures and keynote presentations since her 2011 Trilling Seminar at Columbia, "Spontaneous Particulars of Sound," and yet the book also channels Howe's abiding interest in the works of Dickinson and Stevens, for example, which she discusses in the interviews collected in *The Difficulties*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1989). Compared with the tangible presence of six manuscript fragments from The Emily Dickinson Collection, the co-presence of Wallace Stevens, while perhaps more allusive / elusive / illusive, plays an equally significant role, especially concerning Howe's engagements with Williams's works and also with various materials in the Jonathan Edwards Collection, which this volume respectively arranges in two key moments. The first (page 34) faces an eighteen-line passage from *The Library* (page 35) and formulates an incisive reading of Stevens's assessment of Williams's developing poetics, c. 1921–1949. Howe concludes this prose poem, thus—"Spontaneous sound particulars balance the scale of law with magic" (34)—thereby amplifying this book's resonance with two of Stevens's poems, "The Creations of Sound" (from *Transport to Summer*) and "The Course of a Particular" (omitted from *The Collected Poems*), which receives momentary emphasis in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (25, 74) and magnified "neathering" in "Vagrancy in the Park" (2015).

The second of these instances (page 63) reconfigures a paragraph from Howe's 2009 essay, "Choir Answers to Choir," where the passage appears amidst reflections upon Stevens's "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," and Jonathan Edwards's "A Divine and Supernatural Light":

Poetry has no proof nor plan nor evidence by decree or in any other way. From somewhere in the twilight realm of

sound a spirit of belief flares up at the point where meaning stops and the unreality of what seems most real floods over us. It's a sense of self-identification and trust, or the granting of grace in an ordinary room, in a secular time. (58)

In *Spontaneous Particulars*, this penultimate paragraph includes an additional sentence—"The inward ardor I feel while working in research libraries is intuitive" (63)—which adapts an earlier moment in the 2009 essay: "Understanding isn't something that belongs to reason. Understanding comes to pass as an outward sign of inward grace. The feeling of union and bliss I get while reading 'The Owl in the Sarcophagus' is intuitive" (57). The backwards-forwards disjunctive reticulations here accentuate Howe's reverence for poetry of a certain magnitude "running parallel to religious faith" through which "words engender objects in spite of the fact there is no inherent reason a particular one should stand so wrought" ("Choir" 57–58). The co-presence in *Spontaneous Particulars* of these intra- and intertextual passages signals Howe's synchronous discoveries (c. 2005): of "the term 'Labadist' in reference to the genealogical research of Wallace Stevens and his wife Elsie Kachel Moll Stevens" (*Souls*, NDP, 23); of Jean de Labadie, the Labadie Tract, and the "'labadie poplar'" (*Souls*, CD, insert); and of "the vast collection of Edwards family papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library" (*Frolic*, CD, insert). And this wider context illuminates a generative nexus of performances, lectures, and publications—further complicating questions of 'origin' and 'ending' for *Spontaneous Particulars* [*of Sound*], especially when we recall that *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, the book, includes "Personal Narrative" that returns to the Hope Atherton story from *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (Awede, 1987), which echoes the Stevens poems noted above & etc. Balancing law with magic, these multifarious highly charged oppositional silences and gaps among, between, and within Howe's phanopoetic particulars invite "a mysterious leap of love" (25).

Libraries are sheltered wildernesses where sacred and secular realms converge and diverge at thresholds in spacetime: "So it's telepathic though who knows why or in what way" (*Souls*, CD, insert). Each page in *Spontaneous Particulars* is a polyvocal poem of liminal image/text reconfigurations on the verge of disappearance. Howe's poetics deftly whorl eccentric fusions of archival recovery, artifactual collage, and apostrophic floreate foldingflare:



follow other birds in *Spontaneous Particulars*, each an animistic folding/unfolding of archives, artifacts, and apostrophes. Howe's threshold poetics limn these polysemous soundsandsilences approaching disappearances on multiple levels throughout the volume, engendering velocities for "A flock of wild fowl in flight" (26).

The image of this poet as a "library cormorant" emerges from *The Birth-mark* and has since reified into a trope for Howe's tenacious hunting for books, as recently underscored by Marjorie Perloff's announcement on the detachable wrapper for *Spontaneous Particulars* as well as by Jonathan Creasy's review. Perloff aptly modifies the figure to suit this "extraordinary telepathy of archives [which] is the very opposite of passive absorption," and Creasy turns this metaphor toward "the poet's sense of the library and manuscript archive as untouched wilderness" where the researcher/explorer forges "through guarded, forbidden territory." The numerous birds in Susan Howe's works (past and present) are "tender, tangled, violent, august, and infinitely various" (59). There are no cormorants per se in *Spontaneous Particulars*, but there are doves, falcons, nightingales, teals, "winged Sesames" (78) among others lost or found, and one glorious swan.

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