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“istory scattered to the fou”: Facing Pages, Radical Contingency, and Historical Figuration in Susan Howe’s Artist Books

Since *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time* (1987), *Kidnapped* (2002), and *Frolic Architecture* (2010), many of Susan Howe’s poems including history have engaged the forms and tropes of the captivity narrative, especially *TOM TIT TOT* (2014). *TTT* alludes to an English variant of the German *Rumpelstilzchen* story in which these words—“Nimmy Nimmy Not / Your Name’s TOM TIT TOT”—break the spell.¹ Whereas the spinning of flax into skeins weaves the folktale’s plot, here, in *TTT*, the collaging of “words from images twi[sted] / [f]rom their original source / [h]istory scattered to the fou[r] [winds]” shapes Howe’s transfiguration of texts into concrete poems resembling textiles or wordwhorls. *TOM TIT TOT* is Howe’s most collaborative and dynamic inter-/intra-textual reconfiguration of captivity narratives; the work includes echoes from *Articulation*, and is deeply informed by the poet’s methods in *Frolic*.

In all of these works shaped by Howe’s fascination with captivity narratives, we simultaneously experience language through both sides of the page and across facing pages; these cross-genre sequential collages invite our dialogue with inter- and intra-texts—recalling the Latin, *textus*—experienced as woven compositions of radical contingencies. Howe’s “istory scattered to the fou”—that is, the work’s historical figuration—engages such multimodalities as lyrical, physical, and social encounters within and against, across and through the work’s archives and artifacts. Such a poetics and praxis recovers, remediates, and releases languages and lives while also subverting their captivity by teleological historiographic and institutional frameworks.

This presentation will investigate such critical intersections among facing pages, radical contingency, and historical figuration in Susan Howe’s multimodal artist books, especially *Kidnapped* (Coracle Press), *Frolic Architecture* (Grenfell Press), and *TOM TIT TOT* (MOMA and Grenfell Press).

¹ Joseph Jacobs, *English Fairy Tales*, Illustrated by John D. Batten (London: David Nutt, 1890), 8.