

Dia Art Foundation

# Alice Notley and Brenda Coultas

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, November 10, 2011, 6:30 pm

## Introduction by Vincent Katz

### Brenda Coultas

Brenda Coultas was born in Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1958, but raised across the border on the Indiana side of the Ohio River. She received her BA from Southern Indiana University in 1989 and an MFA in prose from the Naropa Institute in 1993. Coultas's publications include *Early Films* (1996), *A Handmade Museum* (2003), which won the Norma Farber First Book Award from The Poetry Society of America, and *The Marvelous Bones of Time* (2007).

"I collect ephemera" writes Brenda Coultas in "Tatters," a new work, from which she'll be reading tonight. Coultas is a connoisseur of ghosts, of traces, of forgotten stories. Using supple prose to form her poems, she divagates, finding data that become her poems' textures. In *A Handmade Museum*, she consciously set out to document the Bowery before it became Bowery: The Theme Park. Somehow, she knew, and like Joseph Cornell, who asked Stan Brakhage to go out and film New York's elevated trains when he knew they were on the way out, Coultas determined to fix in words a classic aspect of the New York landscape that would change irrevocably. There is an emotional charge to her investment in New York, not just the contrast between rich and poor, but the adoption of New York, her particular take on a city that has been so richly depicted in verse. *The Marvelous Bones Of Time*, by contrast, takes Coultas very much back to her roots, the borderline territory between states, between politics, between histories.

The details in Coultas's poems shine like alluring gems, items she has collected for us, categorized, and displayed in perfectly proportioned cases. But what captivates us, what makes it clear we are in the presence of a new, intriguing, sense of poetry, are the absences. Coultas's music is in what she leaves out, the rests. There, with impressive restraint, she allows her story to enter and mingle with the many stories she has accumulated during her peregrinations. Please welcome Brenda Coultas to Dia.

### Alice Notley

Alice Notley was born on November 8, 1945, in Bisbee, Arizona, and grew up in Needles, California. She received a B.A. from Barnard College in 1967 and an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1969. She has published over thirty books of poetry, including *Grave of Light, New and Selected Poems 1970-2005* (2006), *In The Pines* (2007), *Reason and Other Women* (2010), and *Culture of One* (2011). She is also the author of a book of essays on poets and poetry, entitled *Coming After* (2005). "During the late sixties and early seventies she lived a peripatetic, rather outlawish poet's life (San Francisco, Bolinas, London, Essex, Chicago) before settling on New York's Lower East Side. For sixteen years there, she was an important force in the eclectic second generation of the so-called New York School of poetry. She has never tried to be anything but a poet..."

Alice Notley's life work can be described as the epic potential of lyric. Her voice, from her earliest published poems to her most recent, is one of music — a singing, rhythmic, forceful breathing, that carries the poet and her listener along a flow that is complicated and at times difficult. The poems start when the poet is young, and, despite an undercurrent of pain, are full of the humor and optimism of youth. In "Dear Dark Continent," published in 1973 in her book *Incidentals In The Day World*, she wrote about the discovery of being a woman in a young family with a husband and son:

...But isn't it only I in the real  
whole long universe? Alone to be  
in the whole long universe?  
But I and this he (and he) makes ghosts of  
I and all the hes there would be, won't be

because now I am he, we are I, I am we.

We're not the completion of myself.

Not the completion of myself, but myself!  
through the whole long universe.

With the passage of time and its inevitable subtractions, the poet, who once spoke her voice through a particular community's voices, became more and more independent, both in terms of structure and subject, directly attacking social and political situations. In all that progression, though, Alice Notley has created an exemplary body of human music. In an early poem titled "Fair Weather" (from *When I Was Alive*, 1980), she wrote, "All anyone has ever wanted / is to walk in one's own / melody..." Although she pays homage to Williams, O'Hara, Denby, and others, Notley has surely found an individual sense of intellectual emotion as musical instrument. 27 years later, in her long poem "In The Pines," Notley writes, "There's nothing in it but songs."

What she is doing is transforming our idea of what a poem can be — oracular, ethereal, gritty, complaining, and ultimately, still, as Notley has written, before it can *about* anything, it must function purely as poetry. Please welcome Alice Notley.