

Film exploration of Susan Sontag

Filmmaker and writer Nancy Kates will be the featured artist at October's MacDowell Downtown presentation. Currently in residence at The MacDowell Colony, Kates will present an excerpt of her work-in-progress, "Regarding Susan Sontag," a feature-length documentary examining the life of essayist, novelist, and activist Susan Sontag.

Kates decided to make a film about Sontag in 2004, not long after Sontag's death from leukemia. Following on the heels of her success with "Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin" — a documentary about gay civil rights activist Bayard Rustin (which premiered at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival and was broadcast nationally on the PBS series P.O.V.) — Kates was looking for a project she could really sink her teeth into.

"I'd been toying with other ideas, but none of them were sticking," she says. "I knew right away this would be an engrossing project. Sontag was brilliant and complicated."

Though drawn to Sontag as a subject because of her recognizable name and her widely respected ideas and work, Kates is also interested in examining the parts of Sontag's life that have remained somewhat obscure. Sontag's papers, which are housed at UCLA, have been vitally important in this regard, as have her diaries. Published in 2008, the first volume of the diaries — "Reborn: Journals & Notebooks, 1947-1963" — reveals intimate details about the personality and thought process of Sontag, a great creative thinker who influenced the arts and politics of her time. The diaries also include per-

sonal accounts of Sontag's relationships, which affirm the widely rumored but never openly substantiated fact that she was bisexual.

"Many Americans know Sontag's name," Kates's project description states. "The film will show us who she was, and why her thoughts about topics such as illness, photography, war, terrorism, and torture remain vitally important in the new world of the 21st century."

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With "Regarding Susan Sontag," Kates plans to tell Sontag's story using

a number of different tools, including archival footage, stills, graphics, interviews, and — in regard to the diaries — experimental sequences. "I see it as a quilt," says Kates about her vision for the film. "I'm trying to weave everything together in a way that is exciting, while trying to keep an open mind about how to tell the story."

While in residence at MacDowell, Kates is working on planning and scheduling the next round of interviews for the film.

"I have more than 100 people in mind, and I have to narrow it down," she explains. "I have to try to figure out who is going to help me drive the story."

MacDowell Downtown will take place on Friday, October 2nd, 2009, at 7:30 p.m. at the Peterborough Historical Society in downtown Peterborough. The series, which occurs the first Friday of every month from March to November, is free and open to the public; refreshments are served. For more information, call 603-924-3886 or visit our Web site at www.macdowellcolony.org to sign up for MacDowell's monthly e-News.