Johanna Drucker

"Books as a Way of Life: Rosmarie & Keith Waldrop"

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Books as a Way of Life:
Rosmarie & Keith Waldrop
by Johanna Drucker

Keith and Rosmarie Waldrops' house has more books per square inch than any house I have ever been in. They write books, read books, print and publish books, collect books, try and get rid of books, send and receive books — and everyplace you look in their rooms there are shelves — over the doors and windows, up the stairs and along the hallways, into the bathrooms and bedrooms and back out again. Theirs is a life lived in and among books — books as a way of life. And where there aren't books, there is art and music and arcane artifacts in an ongoing collage of found, made, and reworked objects. Every possible pun on text, textured, textural, and context could be applied to their domestic environment without exhausting the layered richness which meets the eye at every glance in their house and press in Providence.

This isn't really surprising given the wide variety of activities they've pursued together and individually in their lives — as poets, translators, teachers, publishers, performers, critics, and intellectuals. But their many areas of creative life intersect over and over again with the "book" as a form. Though not involved with artists' books per se, their work offers a study in a commitment to books as a literary form. Aware of their work from the mid-1970s onward, I did not have occasion to meet them in person until the late 1980s. My first visit to their house made a deep and lasting impression as the image of lives lived in an environment entirely steeped in books, surrounded by the activity of reading, writing, printing, and publishing. In December, 1992, JAB paid the Waldrops a visit in order to sketch this brief profile and portrait and heard about how they met (while Keith was in the military and stationed in Germany in the 1950s and made friends in the town with his turntable and stack of records), how Rosmarie came to the U.S. (thanks to a cash award Keith won for a critical essay in a University of Michigan prize endowed by Avery Hopwood — a super-successful writer of light comedies who aspired to a real literary career, made a fortune, and sadly did himself in), and about various high jinks and pranks and meetings with now famous and well-known and once obscure poets and writers and artists. Typical of such tales was Keith's account of the founding of the John Barton Wolgamot Society prompted by his finding the odd (only) volume by this (utterly unknown) author: In Sara, Mencken, Christ and Beethoven There Were Men and Women. Published in 1944 it is an odd piece of "outsider" publishing, but more on that later.

The Waldrops began their publishing ventures under the imprint Burning Deck in 1961 when both were still graduate students at the University of Michigan. Possessed of considerably more intellectual energy than material means, they quickly realized that learning to print would enable them to be far more productive than if they had to pay commercial printers for their publications. So they bought a Chandler and Price and several fonts of type and launched Burning Deck magazine. The first issues, pamphlet style in format and binding, contain a wide range of poets — some now obscure, others renowned: Dallas Wiebe, Robert Creeley, Richard Emil Braun, Martin Lieberman, Theodore Holmes, Anne Stevenson, Edwin Honig, Robert Duncan, Dorothy Donnelly, Bert Meyers, Christopher Middleton, and Louis Zukofsky. To a poet or literary critic this list of names reveals a striking combination of the eclectic and esoteric — rarified practitioners of arcane literary skill, each with a unique voice and style. This attitude has characterized the Waldrops' output in the nearly four decades since — and the more than a hundred titles produced as Burning Deck books have continued to exhibit a non-dogmatic editorial stance. Each manuscript is appreciated on its own terms rather than its place within a fixed aesthetic program — to the delight of many and frustration of some within literary circles.

But what makes the Waldrops' activity interesting to those of us working in book formats is that they have a theoretical and critical interest in books as objects — as well as vehicles of communication arts. I don't mean this in the usual "books-as-objects" sense — but in a more subtle, philosophical way. Once of the key elements of this interest is evident in Rosmarie's long-standing involvement with the work of Edmond Jabès, the writer/poet/philosopher whose work has prompted major critical discussions about "the book" in all its symbolic resonance. In the mid-1960s Rosmarie encountered Jabès's The Book of Questions (first published in French in 1969) and became interested in translating the work. The text was a major departure for Jabès, a Jewish-Egyptian poet, who had been expelled from the country of his birth as part of post-war anti-Jewish policies. Prior to his expulsion, Jabès had been little concerned with ethnic or religious issues. The Book of Questions, the first in a series of three books concerned with issues of Jewish identity, history, and culture in a philosophical context, is also a metacritical inquiry into the nature of the "book" as a form and idea. The combination of these themes with an enigmatic writing style makes the work a synthesis of modern French poetics of the word and book and a cultural inquiry of profound dimensions. Rosmarie began working on the translation, and though she kept at it intermittently over several years, she was never quite satisfied enough with her efforts to see the project through. But then in 1970-71, she and Keith spent a year in Paris. They had almost no literary and/or social connections there and it was almost by accident that they got to know a contemporary poetry scene through two other poets, George and Chris Tys, who were also living in Paris at the time and needed a place in which to hold occasional readings. The Waldrops offered their living room and consequently met a circle of French poets — after the first night's reading conversations ranged around and finally turned to Rosmarie's interests in Jabès. As it turned out, one of the poets present, Claude Royet-Journoud, knew Jabès, was very excited about the prospect of the translation, and introduced the two. Jabès read through the first fifty pages and then offered his assistance in the translation project.

Describing their interaction, Rosmarie commented on the way Jabès would respond to her questions by weaving an elaborate discussion of associations, meanings, possible interpretations of words and passages rather than seeking simple mechanical equivalences for any word or phrase. Through this process of reading as a form of discussion and conversation, her sense of the spare texts became layered and dimensional. The insight into
the processes of meaning production in the textual condition of these works seems to resonate through much of her own poetry — taking the material fact of language as a metaphor and instrument of thought, rather than a descriptive record of an experience or epiphany. This commitment to text as structure and form, idea and meaning, fraught with philosophical concerns, is a feature of the work of the French poets in the circle she and Keith met in that first extended visit to Paris — a number of whom they have translated and/or published: Royet-Journoud, Anne-Marie Albiach, Joseph Gugliemi, and, in their later acquaintance, Emmanuel Hocquard and Dominique Fourcade.

This “French connection” is only one of the many networks through which the Waldrops’ elaborate social life as intellectuals has been sustained. Keith’s position in the English and Creative Writing programs at Brown University (and Rosmarie’s more intermittent teaching) has brought them into contact with hundreds of poets over the decades. Burning Deck’s list of authors reflects that contact as does the range of young, emerging poets and mature writers in that group. As publishers, the Waldrops have provided many authors with the opportunity to put a first — and sometimes only — book in print. The activity of the press was given a considerable boost in the early 1970s just after the NEA had been established. Inconceivable though it seems now, a representative of the program in Literature visited local arts councils throughout the country, encouraging applications for the newly available funds. As a result of the grants they received, they increased the volume of publication to six or seven titles a year in their peak years. They continued to do
much of the printing work themselves, adding a high-speed Heidelberg letterpress to their collection of Chandler and Price platen presses. The major cost factors in production were always binding and paper, the mailing of completed books, and for longer manuscripts, linotyping costs. The pamphlet-sized books were distinguished by their letterpress production, always modest and in the service of the text, rather than ostentatiously participating in a fine print tradition. As writers, both were more interested in readability, functional presentation, archival and straightforward, rather than in decorative excesses or exaggerated production values. These were clear decisions, worked through as an understanding of what a book was/is in its literary existence. But for all that, the books have a material sensibility which rewards the eye and hand. The crisp paper supports the poems on the page, the letterpress covers were often multicolored, requiring several runs, and the pamphlet stitching is strong and durable.

The offset books of longer manuscripts are equally straightforward, frequently with simple black and white covers. There is a sense of the standard book, the most inconspicuous format, in these productions. But again, these were conscious decisions, made with an understanding of how such presentation serves the work. The "book" is not an incidental form, but a considered one. And this sensibility informs both of their work as writers as well. When asked about the ways in which they thought of the book in their writing, each made a different response. Rosmarie made the point that she never thought of a volume of her work as a selection of poems, but as a whole, an integrated entirety in which the
books were part of a whole text of interconnected pieces. Keith commented that it was in part from reading the works of Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer and seeing the films of Sergei Eisenstein that he came to his own understanding of the intricate/intimate relations of part to whole in the structure of a work. Duncan's sense of place within the structure of a poem — almost in an analogy with musical staffs marking the unfolding of a work over time combined with Ezra Pound's notion of the "periplum" — a process of finding one's way through a sequence of directions which also move through time. The periplum is rooted in a sense of the experiential and phenomenological rather than in the objectified gestalt or single mapped image of a work.

There is only one work in Rosmarie's printed oeuvre which displays any elaborate visual manipulation of the text, Camp Printing (1970). In the course of printing a manuscript by the poet James Camp, Rosmarie made an accidental overprint on a sheet. As often happens in the process of printing, she became intrigued by the graphic possibilities and proceeded to experiment. The result was a remarkable visual book in which the full gamut of possibilities for visual production were explored. What strikes me in this book is the way the sense of the poem continues to motivate the pages — as if the essential structure of the poem is made more evident through the process of repetition and overprinting.

Through their many connections and broadly based interests in the arts and literature, the Waldrops have both produced all manner of work. Keith Waldrop's visual collages are exhibited regularly, and he has been involved in theatrical activity on and off throughout his career. Rosmarie recently had a very French (as she put it) artist's book produced in a very limited edition — with handpainted images accompanying her poetry. On thick paper, in a slightly larger format than any Burning Deck book.
this work has its own charm and beauty. But it was of another order entirely from the bulk of the production to which she and Keith have been committed over the last decades. As we sat by the fire through the short winter afternoon, and each told various anecdotes about past events, Keith brought out the volume by John Barton Wolgamot which had inspired his original literary society's name—a work of "outsider" book publishing. Premised on translating Beethoven’s Eroica symphony into linguistic parallels, citing names which Wolgamot claimed to have heard within the rhythms of the music itself, it consists of a full volume of pages on which a single sentence has been varied over and over. Each sentence, always one to a page, contains a series of names. The sentence itself took Wolgamot ten years to compose and yet an entire personal cosmology is latent in the book’s title, that sentence, and Wolgamot’s own history. There it was, printed and bound, a curiosity which had sparked Keith’s interest and imagination more than thirty years earlier.

With a keen appreciation of the quality of language and poetics, Keith had used the work for a quirky touchstone in his own evolution as a writer.

It would be impossible to characterize the work of either of these poets in any single assessment. Each have a lifetime of publications to their credit. And in many cases, their books are distinct projects, conceived with a distinct aesthetic parameter as a point of departure. Take Rosmarie’s 1978 The Road is Everywhere or Stop This Body (published by Open Places). The language in this work combines abstractions and highly specific references in a series of poems concerned with movement through space (the literal space of highways, traffic, urban scenes), the sense of a body as a site of subjective experience (her own, specific, gendered, particular), and the negotiation of language with its defining rules and limits (represented in part by the trope of highway signs as markers of control).

Stop This Body deftly merges these strains of thought, while allowing their distinctive qualities to show in the choice of vocabulary, movement of line to line, and the structure of each section within the larger work. The element of Rosmarie’s writing which persists throughout her oeuvre is this skill at allowing abstract conceptualizations of thought process as-language to move between the forms of convention and the specific, concrete terms of language appropriate to each project. Thus in The Reproduction of Profiles (1987, New Directions), the format of the works on the page, the choice of typeface, and the structure of the text are all as distinctive as they were in Stop This Body. Profiles is concerned with mirroring, with the production of self and subjecthood through the intimate sociality of relations, particularly close relations. Within their unified form on the page the blocks of prose describe processes of exchanged glances, information, commentary all as part of the ongoing business of
self-production. Though highly intellectual, these are also works
which chart the nuanced shifts of emotional atmosphere so famil-
iliar within the context of close interpersonal exchange:

“You told me, if something is not used it is meaningless, and
took my temperature which I had thought to save for a more
difficult day. In the mirror, every night, the same face, a bit
more threadbare, a dress worn too long. The moon was out in
the cold, along with the restless, dissatisfied wind that seemed
to change the location of the sycamores. I expected
reproaches because I had mentioned the word love, but you
only accused me of stealing your pencil, and sadness disap-
ppeared with sense. You made a ceremony out of holding your
head in your hands because, you said, it could not be
contained in itself.” p.23, section III, “Feverish Propositions”
The Reproduction of Profiles

Yet another striking contrast is offered by When They Have
Senses (Burning Deck, 1980) in which the forms of poetic line are
explored page by page. Each set of grouped phrases structures an
individual form. A catalogue of “senses” modified by adjectives
forms the table of contents, and the links between the phenomen-
ological aspects of perception and the conceptual frameworks
of language are as varied as these categories of “craftily,”
“dubiously,” “commonly” suggest. The point is that the work of
poetry is intimately bound up with a sense of the book, the page,
and the appearance of text as format on a page. There is no arbi-
trary “dressing” of the text in typeface, or structure made as
gratuitous form, in any of these works. Each book takes on a
problem, and resolves it as a book of poetic work in which the
graphic elements of book structure play an active role.

Keith’s work, like Rosmarie’s, varies from project to project.
But there are persistent strains of autobiographical revelation in
his work which allow his proclivity for the succinct phrase to
communicate a condensed but vivid image of recalled experi-
ence. Keith’s work seems more concerned with recollection than
immediacy, with the distance between language and experience
than Rosmarie’s — as she seems to structure experience into the
process of reading for the viewer.

In The Space of Half an Hour (Burning Deck, 1983), these
qualities are clearly evident — the combination of personal in-
formation with its resonance within an intellectual archive, and the
clear first-person voice structuring writing as a form of recapitu-
lation, even recovery and/or its impossibility. Take this beginning
of a stanza for instance:

“I only know where it
is I’m looking
from what I’m
looking at. Objects
thin into
etymologies. I see
by getting about. I
remember by wanting eyes
in perpetual movement.
The future is a
long retrospective, watching
a whole
life pass. The law of
accident assumes the
certainty of error.” (p.23)

It is the personal voice in Keith’s work which moves me — the
sharply delineated glimpses of a life lived in realities and yet
imagined forth as poetry which offers a view of the lived refracted
back in hard, clear lines. The Silhouette of the Bridge (Memory
Stand-ins) (Avec, 1997), comments on this process. Highly self-
conscious, it offers carefully noted observations of the ways
observation of existence are transformed from perception to
cognition so that some ironic ordering into sense might occur out
of the quirky, unreasonable randomness of lived events:

“Over the years, I have allowed unstated — even uncon-
scious—judgments to determine, for instance, what I will read
or not read. Without condemning so and so’s work, I cease to
look for new installments. Not throwing aside such-and-such a
book, I simply do not pick it up, but look at another. One
cannot give everything or even very many things, full atten-
tion.” (p.21-22).

Of all Keith’s books, Light While There is Light (Sun & Moon,
1994) remains my favorite. Straightforward, unflinching, and
lucid, it is an account of his family circumstances, childhood, and
teenage. A distinctly American strain runs through the book
with its midwestern locales, fundamentalist frameworks, and
culturally restricted perspectives. And yet, the voice which
narrows its own source in these specific and particular circum-
stances also gives evidence of the complex capacity of individual
experience to find its own way in the world and own place, and
then to rework that past as material through the device of poetic
form into communication. The range of this work, both Keith and
Rosmarie’s, and the rich rewards which come from reading it,
make it abundantly clear that like the work of many book artists,
that of many truly amazing poets exists beneath the level of the
radar of mainstream culture — and that it is the best of contem-
porary culture, unique, individual, well-made, and engaging in
every way.

end

The Waldrop’s books are available from:
Small Press Distribution
1814 San Pablo Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94702
(510) 549-3336 · FAX (510) 549-2201