

Dia Art Foundation

Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Thursday, May 10, 2016, 6:30 pm

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop have published several works written in collaboration: the collection *Well Well Reality* (Sausalito, Calif.: Post-Apollo Press, 1998); their autobiographies, *Ceci n'est pas Keith Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie* (Providence: Burning Deck, 2002); a translation of Jacques Roubaud's poems about the streets of Paris, titled *The Form of a City Changes Faster, Alas, Than the Human Heart* (Victoria, Tex.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006); and the Abecedarian work *flat with no key* (Providence: Burning Deck, 2008). They founded Burning Deck Press in 1961.

Rosmarie Waldrop was born in Kitzingen, Germany, in 1935. Her recent books include *Love, Like Pronouns* (Richmond, Calif.: Omnidawn, 2003), *Blindsight* (New York: New Directions, 2003), *Curves to the Apple* (New York: New Directions, 2007), and *Driven to Abstraction* (New York: New Directions, 2010). *Gap Gardening: Selected Poems* is just out from New Directions Press. Her collection of essays, *Dissonance (if you are interested)*, was published by University of Alabama Press in 2005. She has translated fourteen volumes of Edmond Jabès's work, as well as work by other experimental French and German authors. In 1993, she was awarded the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award for her translation of Jabès's *The Book of Margins*, and was named *Chevalier des Arts et des lettres* by the French government. She lives in Providence.

"I wanted to be a poet," writes Rosmarie Waldrop, "but thought it was not possible after I came to the U.S. and 'lost' my language... It followed, I thought, that the way I could work with poetry would be translating (into German) and teaching. It was only gradually that I mustered the courage to attempt poems in English and to translate into English. It came with the realization that the discrepancies between my two languages need not be an obstacle, but could, on the contrary, become a generative force."

Reading through Rosmarie Waldrop's *Selected Poems*, one finds waves of poetry and prose interceding, making incursions, then giving way, enabling diverse forms of writing. Her early poems are notable for their acceptance of the mundanity of things, and of language. In a long sequence titled "As If We Didn't Have To Talk" (1972), she writes:

The way this city plays
with our bodies
so much rain the smell of wet
cement stays in the streets
out of the old shell
we're always walking in a crowd

By the time of her work "Split Infinites" (1998), repetitions have taken on a life of their own, so that prepositions and conjunctions assume a dominant role in determining the poems' musicality. Finally, history and memoir are embedded in mellifluous text that is kept as fresh as something just seen or tasted. One gets the sensation, reading her later pieces, that, uncannily, everything is connected:

Let us therefore use a little nubile and strong. Bewildered, carnivore. And that from childhood. Mother in a pose of annihilation. Sexual autonomy. Does it occur? Cf. *Philosophical Investigations*. To the ends of the earth.
(from "The Mind," from "Split Infinites")

And we should follow Rosmarie to the ends of the earth, if necessary, which I doubt. Here she is tonight. Please welcome her.

Keith Waldrop was born in Emporia, Kansas, in 1932. His books include the trilogy: *The Locality Principle* (Penngrove, Calif.: Avec Books, 1995), *The Silhouette of the Bridge* (Penngrove, Calif.: Avec Books, 1997), and *Semiramis If I Remember* (Penngrove, Calif.: Avec Books, 2001); *The Real Subject* (Richmond, Calif.: Omnidawn, 2004); *Transcendental Studies: A Trilogy* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009), which received a National Book Award, and *Selected Poems*, just out from Omnidawn Press. Siglio Press published a book of his collages, *Several Gravities*, in 2009. Waldrop has translated Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2009) and *Flowers of Evil* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), as well as books by several contemporary French poets. In 2000, he was named *Chevalier des arts et des lettres* for his lifetime contribution to French literature. He lives in Providence.

Keith Waldrop's earliest poems present a charming "I," who may in fact have something in common with the author. For instance, he stares at paintings so hard, he feels he is about to consume them. And elsewhere, he notes:

...[My life] seems to be turning out,
as predicted, a small provincial museum, the kind
that might have in some corner or other one work
you could be interested in, if you knew it was there.
(from "Antiquary")

There is a lot invested in this "I" — in "Conversion," the poet informs us that "Keith means 'wind,' according / to *What to Name the Baby*." There is an almost Ed Dorn-like directness to some of these early poems, even to the use of humor as a means of documentation, of family, of neighborhood. "Two Reports" is a stunning apostrophe to the poet's deceased father.

His poems get a lot denser, yet simultaneously expansive. The "I" persists, as in the long poem "Elegy" (1983): "I live on the surface, in / a world not yet // evolved" he writes. And elsewhere in the same poem: "Hardly anything matters to me now / but work..." The restraint of his poem "The Ruins of Providence" is almost unparalleled.

And yet, the perceptible world surrounds this "I," takes on more importance in the poems. The "I" does not disappear, it is more surrounded. In "Plurality of Worlds," from *Transcendental Studies* (2009), all is present, even as it becomes distant. Things become animate, grammar remains. And in these poems, the poet allows us to see existence, as if without filters. Please welcome Keith Waldrop.