

Keith & Rosmarie Waldrop

Burning Deck Press

Burning Deck Press specializes in the publication of experimental poetry and prose, as well as two series of translation: *Serie d'écriture* dedicated to contemporary French poetry and *Dichten*= dedicated to contemporary German writing. Burning Deck was founded by the writers and translators Keith Waldrop (born in Emporia, Kansas in 1932) and Rosmarie Waldrop (born in Kitzingen, Germany in 1935) in 1961. Although the Waldrops initially promoted *Burning Deck Magazine* as a “quinterly,” in Michigan, after four issues the periodical was transformed into a series of pamphlets set by hand and printed letterpress. The transformation continued until Burning Deck became a publisher of books of poetry and short fiction.

The magazine published poets from different styles and schools. The main split in poets of that time was said to be the one between the “academics” and the “beats,” but Burning Deck ignored that split to the point where authors sometimes complained of being published in the company of others so different from themselves.

By 1985, the economics of publishing had changed and it became financially more feasible to print books on offset presses and use the letterpress for smaller chapbooks. The Waldrops continued to design and print books that are made to last (using Smyth-sewn, acid-free paper) but tried to keep the price affordable.

Burning Deck’s archives are housed at Brown University, where Keith taught for many years. Burning Deck has published hundreds of books, including titles by Paul Auster, Robert Coover, Robert Creeley, Jean Daive, Caroline Dubois, Barbara Guest, Lyn Hejinian, Monika Rinck, Cole Swenson, as well as several books of the Waldrops’ own poems. Keith is also a collage artist, and has made striking cover art for many of their books. Burning Deck Press closed in 2017, leaving 247 books in its wake.

jackson mac low



Jackson Mac Low, *4 Trains* (Burning Deck Press, 1974)

KS: Burning Deck has been publishing continuously for more than half a century. Reflecting on the early years of the press in *A Century in Two Decades*, you said that there was a sharp editorial division between the journals and anthologies publishing “beat” and “academic” poets, and that you disregarded that common tendency, preferring to publish the poetry you found interesting rather than siding with any particular camp. I know that the terms have changed with the times (poets of my generation don’t identify as “beats” or “academics”), but do you think that a similar division still exists in poetry today?

RW: Well, the distinction wasn’t quite that sharp then, either. With “beat” were lumped “Black Mountain,” “New York School,” “San Francisco Renaissance”—all the poets published in Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry*. But yes, the terms have changed to the vaguer “avant-garde” and “traditional” (or less neural adjectives!), but the division still exists.

KS: As a kid growing up outside Providence, Burning Deck did much to inform my sense of what contemporary poetry could be. Your books were in every shop and I bought them whatever I could because I thought you had such terrific taste. I thought, “If the Waldrops think it’s worth publishing, it must be worth reading.” Who were the particular editors or publishers that made an impression on you as young poets?

RW: Once I came to this country it was New Directions, probably taking the lead from Keith. Before that, in Germany, I seem to remember that I just gobbled up whatever I could lay my hands on in the one decent bookstore in town.

KW: I was early aware of and impressed by the publications of *New Directions*. Also in the early '60s there were many small presses just starting—we were not the only one, though we outlasted many of them. Most were West Coast or East Coast, but there were a number in the Midwest.

KS: Printing from moveable type began in Germany. Every time I'm there I marvel at the design of things large and small—even the theater tickets are masterfully designed. Growing up, did you have a strong appreciation for the book as a form of art Rosmarie?

RW: No, I was more interested in the contents. It was only when I went to France that I realized how well made most German books were! But I was aware of printing from an early age. The apartment I grew up in was above a printshop, and the yard I played in was full of used lithographic stones with four-color wine labels on them.

KS: You have published many students who have graduated from Brown University. Is there a relationship between *Burning Deck* and the University? Has Brown provided support for the Press?

RW: It's true we published many Brown graduates. I just did a rough count because you made me curious, and there are about thirty of them out of about 135 American authors, so not quite a quarter—though counting the French and German authors it becomes more like one-seventh.

We find manuscripts in all sorts of ways, and Keith's contact with Brown students is just one of them. However, we never published them while they were students. We always let a few years pass after their leaving Brown.

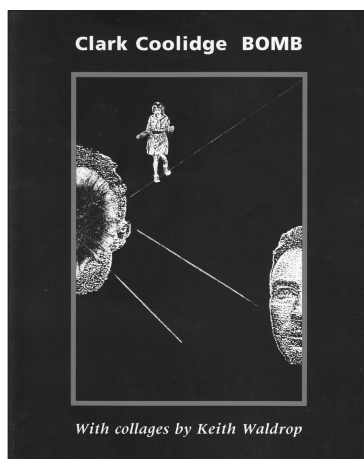
There has been no financial relationship between Brown University and *Burning Deck*. When we first came to Providence Keith could get student proctors for *Burning Deck*, but after

a couple of years the deans realized Burning Deck had really nothing to do with Brown and canceled that. However, Brown University has bought the Burning Deck Archive, which has helped finance the Press.

KS: Someone told me that you have a Heidelberg. I thought it was a Chandler & Price? Could you tell me about your equipment? Do you still use the letterpress?

KW: We started out with an 8" x 10" Chandler & Price that we got secondhand in 1960 when all the printers were disposing of platen presses. It was motor driven, but handfed. Later we traded it for a Chandler & Price somewhat larger, with a 10" x 12" bed. Finally, when we wanted to print full-length books (which meant approximately sixty-four pages), we added a secondhand Heidelberg with a 10" x 15" bed and automatic feed. This must have been in 1974. But in 1985, when we had just printed five books and drove the sheets to our bindery in New Hampshire we found that they, like all the other binderies, had automated, and could no longer bind our small two-up sheets. From then on binding our books would be handwork and forbiddingly expensive. So we came into the computer age and now make files on the computer to be printed offset.

KS: Keith, your collages have appeared on the covers of many Burning Deck books, as well as in collaborations such as *Bomb* with Clark Coolidge. Is there a relationship between your poems and your collages? Do ideas generated in one medium ever feed directly into the other? What about process?



KW: It is not so much that there is a relation as that the process is basically the same. I, like any writer, might come up with a word not expected in the immediate context, but more usually I find the words I use in other texts. Whether visual or verbal, collage is for me a way to explore, not necessarily the thing I am tearing up, but the thing I am contriving to build out of torn pieces. To the extent that there is a purpose to what I do, its end is the “enjoyment of a composition”—a concern, as Whitehead notes, common to aesthetics and logic.

KS: In spite of the fact that the majority of the poets you publish are experimental, typographically speaking, Burning Deck books observe rather traditional rules of legibility. There are some exceptions, such as *Camp Printing*, that to my mind comes closer to an artists book or visual poetry. How would you describe this relationship?

RW: Yes, our typography tends to be classical. We have been interested in presenting texts rather than in playing with or experimenting with the printing process. The more experimental the text, the more clearly I want to define the space of the page. For instance, in Peter Inman’s book *per se*, words scatter in a free, multidirectional movement. I was not satisfied with the layout until I put a line at the top to establish a sense of the page that the words can move against.



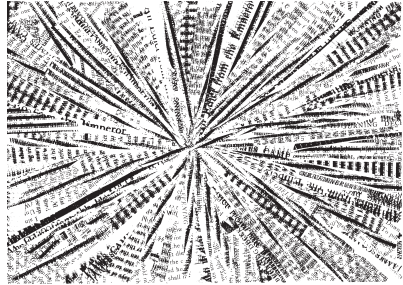
Camp Printing is an exception. While printing a chapbook by James Camp I accidentally overprinted a page and liked the result. Then I began playing, making “printing errors.” The final pages go beyond the printing process: I cut pages in strips and made collages.

KW: My playing with the press mostly took place at the wash-up stage: I would place paper directly on the ink plate during the stages of cleaning and create a kind of monoprint this way.

KS: Could you elaborate?

KW: Sometimes I'd simply put paper on the ink plate while the ink was already thinned by the cleaning fluid. At times some letters showed up dimly. Another technique I added involved painting a bit on the ink plate during the process.

RW: In *Camp Printing*, I mostly overprinted the same sheet of paper more and more times, moving the paper sideways or tilting it. And, following Keith, I'd like to show you an example.



KS: You've both published in many little magazines and many major anthologies. You've also published chapbooks with fledging independent presses, major collections with presses like Random House, university presses, and in extravagant handmade editions. Looking back at all of these books and all of the editors, translators, publishers and artists involved, could you discuss some of your experiences?

RW: One of my first chapbooks was *Spring Is a Season and Nothing Else*, from Walter Hamady's new Perishable Press. It is a beautiful booklet, handset and handprinted on handmade paper in an edition of 110 copies. As I remember, Walter had ninety standing orders from collections of fine printing, he kept ten copies, and I got ten. It was actually frustrating: I had a book—a beautiful book for which I was grateful—and yet I didn't have one. The collectors of fine printing were not likely reading the text, and I could just give the chapbook to a few friends.

Keith had the same experience with *Songs from the Decline of the West*. It was a factor in our decision for Burning Deck not to aim at books that would be kept on closed shelves.

My first full book with Random House, *The Aggressive Ways of the Casual Stranger*, was a lucky fluke. Nan Talese had asked Eleanor Bender, editor of the small magazine *Open Places*, for suggestions. Eleanor, who had published my work often, knew I had a manuscript ready and sent it. Random House didn't want my second book, though, which was actually published by Eleanor Bender as an Open Places Book.

Both Keith and I published in many very small magazines because we followed the rule that if somebody asks for work we'll send it. Nowadays this doesn't work so well anymore because we both write as—or more—slowly than earlier, but get asked much more often.

KS: I believe you and Keith have both published a number of books of your own poems with Burning Deck—what motivated you to self-publish?

KW: Nobody else was doing it!

RW: That's why those books were mostly early, in the 1970s and '80s. Our collaborations are a different story: they were usually written and printed as a New Year's greeting for friends.

KS: Among all of your accomplishments as publishers, you've also translated many of the books yourselves, and introduced me, along with thousands of other readers in the States, to writers in Europe we might not have known otherwise. Could you tell me how this aspect of Burning Deck started, how it's developed over the years?

KW: I always felt I had to translate French or German poems if I really wanted to be able to read and understand them.

RW: When I came to the United States it soon became difficult for me to write in German. It felt artificial. So I thought if I couldn't be a writer, I surely could be a translator and at first translated American poems into German, then started to translate both French and German texts into English. The space between languages seems my natural place. I keep going back there and enjoy the work—even though I often tear my hair at its impossibilities!

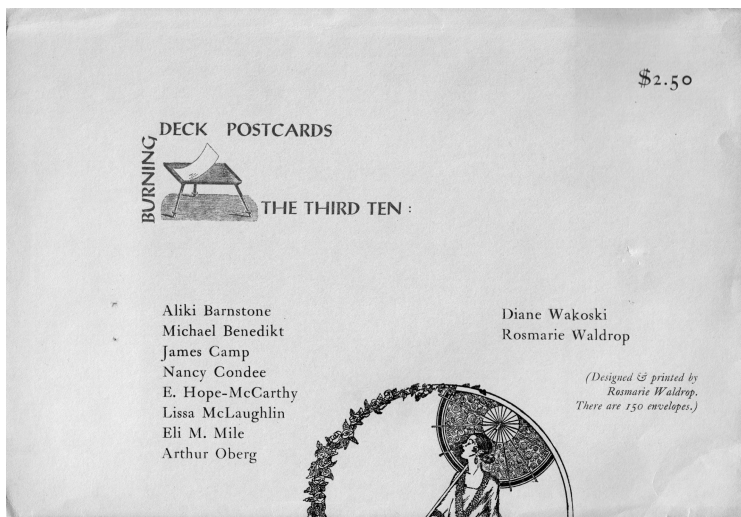
Burning Deck's involvement started with Paul Green of *Spectacular Diseases* magazine asking me to edit a French series, *Série d'écriture*, for him. He published two magazine issues and three single-author issues featuring Alain Veinstein, Emmanuel Hocquard, and Joseph Guglielmi. However, his production quality was so low that I always felt I had to apologize to the authors. From number six on we agreed Burning Deck would publish *Série d'écriture*, but *Spectacular Diseases* would be the European distributor. The German series, *Dichten=*, began shortly after.

KS: Looking back at all the books you've published over the years, which do you return to most often?

KW: *Pegasus Descending: A Book of the Best Bad Verse*, edited by James Camp, X.J. Kennedy, and Keith Waldrop; Barbara Guest's *The Countess From Minneapolis*; Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's *The Heat Bird*; Michael Gizzi's *New Depths of Deadpan*, and Ray Ragosta's *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

RW: *The Heat Bird* by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Emmanuel Hocquard's *A Test of Solitude*, Friederike Mayröcker's *Heiligenanstalt*, and Elizabeth Willis' *Turneresque*.

KS: What's next?



RW: All the 2012 books are coming up in the fall this year. There are two books by American poets: Peter Inman's *per se* and Sarah Riggs' *Autobiography of Envelopes*. We'll also publish a very whimsical Austrian, Elfriede Czurda. I did the translation, and her book is entitled *Almost 1 Book / Almost 1 Life*. And in *Série d'écriture*, we have Sébastien Smirou's *My Lorenzo*, translated by Andrew Zawacki.

The most exciting project for next year is the entire tetralogy of Claude Royet-Journoud with the collective title *Quatre corps simples* (English translation not quite decided yet; "simple bodies" doesn't seem right. Maybe: *Four Elementary Bodies*). It contains the four books *Reversal*, *The Notion of Obstacle*, *Objects Contain the Infinite*, and *Natures Indivisible*, and will be about four-hundred pages.

[2012]