

Counting the New Age: An Interview with Simone Fattal of the Post-Apollo Press

by Karl Roeseler

I first became aware of the Post-Apollo Press in that most primal of ways: I was browsing in a bookstore and saw a book on the shelf that looked interesting. I bought that book (*Sitt Marie Rose* by Etel Adnan), and five years later I solicited a story from Etel for an anthology of short stories (*2000andWhat?*) that I co-edited with David Gilbert for my own Trip Street Press. During the interim, I read many of the Post-Apollo Press's books. I was struck by the austerity and sureness of the publisher's choices, and by how quickly the press established an identity that set it apart from other small presses.

I eventually met the person behind the press through Etel (her longtime companion, friend and lover), but, in a very real way, I felt that I already knew her. Simone Fattal is shy yet gregarious, gentle yet assertive. She has a husky smoker's voice that retains the accents of the places she has lived: Beirut, Paris, Northern California. Curious to find out why she became a small press publisher--whether it was a conscious decision, a series of accidents, or a force of nature--I decided simply to ask. The result is this interview.

Simone and Etel divide their time between Sausalito and Paris. The house in Sausalito is modest, simple, and beautiful--the sort of house that needs an artist and a writer living in it. The basement has been converted into an office (the heart of the Post-Apollo Press), and the garage houses not cars but boxes of books stacked on pallets. Upstairs, the living room features a picture window overlooking the bay. The walls are filled with paintings and drawings without ever seeming crowded. The floors are covered by overlapping carpets and rugs. It is a cozy place that invites one to work--one feels both nurtured and inspired.

What follows is edited from a series of three interviews that we held over a period of two years, all in the living room of the house in Sausalito. The first interview was taped. Subsequent interviews were simply recorded by pen on paper (I played the role of scribe). The final editing was done at the dining room table, with each of us reading our parts aloud. There was something intimate, organic, and perhaps flirtatious about this process.

Karl Roeseler: How did you start publishing?

Simone Fattal: I started publishing in 1982 and I really just wanted to do one chapbook: that poem of Etel Adnan's, *From A to Z*. She wrote it during the time of Three Mile Island. A press in New York wanted to publish a book of her poems, and she showed *From A to Z* to them, but they wanted something else.

I thought it was a beautiful poem and I had met a young guy who had self-published his book--which gave me the idea that one could actually produce a book. And he helped me. He took me around to the typesetters, to the printer, showed me how it was done. And I liked it. I learned how to make a book.

And then we had to choose a name for the press, an ISBN, all of that. At the same time, a friend of mine said she wanted to translate Etel's *Sitt Marie Rose*. So I said, well, if you do, I will publish it. So that's how I became a publisher, by chance.

KR: It seems like there's a story behind the name.

SF: Yes, I thought a lot about it. Etel told me I should use my own name, but I was shy of doing that. Somehow the Apollo program, that took man to the moon, was extremely important to me--it was like the new age starting. The fact that man had left the earth and gone beyond, and that we would be counting the new age from Before Apollo and Post Apollo like we did Before Christ and After Christ. [Laughter]

So, I said, Post-Apollo, and then the logo is the moon, the crescent moon.

KR: Oh!

SF: That's the story. When I first started I didn't have any distribution, and a lot of feminist presses discovered *Sitt Marie Rose* and helped me by distributing the book with their publications. The first one was a magazine called *Connections*. And so I was equated with feminist publishing--everybody thought that Post-Apollo was post, in the sense of after, Apollo, the Greek god.

KR: Right. That's funny.

SF: And, of course, I said, well, there are many meanings . . .

KR: Having run the press for nearly two decades, do you have a conception of where you want to go in the future?

SF: What I would like to do is to go on doing what I've been doing. I've been fortunate to have some very good writers coming my way and to be able to publish them. I've been allowed to follow chance. But I also wanted to do literature. I didn't want to do issues, like a lot of my colleagues started doing--it helped their sales, but literature was what I was interested in, and I still am. I don't want to change that.

KR: Is the process different for choosing each book?

SF: Yes, there's a different process each time. Some writers come to me and some I ask. But I'm adamant about publishing new work each time. Even so, there's a lot of chance involved. I mean, I published Anne-Marie Albiach because I went to a reading in Paris and I met her husband who told me about the book. I read the book and chose to publish it. Barbara Guest--she called me and wanted me to publish her book, which was a *big* chance.

KR: That's interesting that people have specifically sought out the press.

SF: Yes, I think a lot of people are attracted to the beauty of the books. They feel comfortable being published here. I also like to give some writers a first chance, like Georgina Kleege, who translated *Sitt Marie Rose*. She had a first novel that she couldn't find a home for, so I took it on. And it's a very good book. Now, I would like to find good books that sell a little more so the whole thing can, you know, fly.

KR: You've published both poetry and fiction, and even some plays. What will you concentrate on in the future?

SF: I have a few poetry books lined up already. I am doing this series of small books, I have nine of them so far--one of them is yours, *Last Decade*.

KR: It's a wonderful series to be part of--it seems to be popular with other writers.

SF: Some poets want to be part of this series--they go out of the way to give me something that will fit the size of the books.

KR: How did the series evolve?

SF: The idea for the series came from Claude Royet-Journoud, a French poet. When he saw the first book, which was *The Sea On Its Side*, by Ámbar Past, he liked the drawing I had done for the cover so much, he had the idea of making a series--keeping the same drawing but changing the colors each time. So immediately I said, give me a poem and you will be the next one in the series!

And, in fact, he was the first man to be published by Post-Apollo Press.

He had the eye.

KR: Are you interested in publishing anything else?

SF: I would like to find a good work of fiction. Fiction has become, you know, forlorn--it's not at the front. I mean literary fiction.

KR: That's one of the reasons that I began Trip Street, to publish a certain type of literary fiction that just wasn't being published elsewhere. It seemed to me that poetry had its forum, whereas literary fiction didn't.

SF: I think fiction will be coming into its own soon because it has to come. I mean, they are looking for a new fiction form. You write yourself, good fiction. Are you writing now?

KR: Yes. . . the functioning of the press and my own writing don't ever seem to conflict.

SF: That's great.

KR: I don't know why. I think it's because the publishing part is a social activity where I interact with other people and the production of a book is almost a super-added event. Whereas my own work is very isolated.

SF: You need time to isolate yourself and you need time during which you can work.

KR: I know that your background was as a painter. How did your publishing activity and your painting co-exist?

SF: Well, they did not. My painting stopped completely when I started publishing. In fact, it had stopped before I started publishing, so it's not that I stopped because I was publishing. It stopped because I left Lebanon, and put my studio in boxes, and that was a very traumatic experience. My painting did not survive that.

And there is another reason: I worked for ten years and I made a statement and that body of work was done. It was as if I had written a book that was finished. Before I packed my studio I was already doing assemblage, I wanted to branch out . . . maybe if I had gone on I would have done installations, what they call installations today. I don't know. But my painting had arrived at a finishing point.

I had a whole year of transition, a kind of *barzakh*, as it would be called in Arabic, between Lebanon and California, during which I did a big work of embroidery. And I started publishing in 1982. So I never did both, painting and publishing together. But a few years ago I started going to the College of Marin and doing sculpture. So, maybe those two will co-exist.

KR: I'm curious about your painting--how did you know you had completed the last body of work?

SF: I was working on a mountain I could look at from my studio. This mountain was pink before sunset and white after sunset. Very white. And so I was very much obsessed with those transformations. Pink and white. And I worked with that for a long time. And then, one day, I knew it was the last mountain, I put the final line with a red stick of chalk--I knew it was the final line--I had seen all the whites, all the pinks I could see. I had said pretty much everything I had to say about it.

KR: The books that you publish have a very distinctive look and feel about them. It's a relationship between the books themselves--a relationship that's not dissimilar to the different paintings in a body of work.

SF: I use drawings that are made for each particular book--I don't use any existing paintings or drawings. It's a very intimate relationship between each book and its cover.

I try to have an equivalent to the text for the cover.

I also want them to have a similar look so that the press can be recognized.

KR: Tell me about the cover to Barbara Guest's book, *Quill, Solitary Apparition*.

SF: That was a particular problem. Barbara wanted a similar cover to one we used for Anne-Marie Albiach's book, *Mezza Voce*, which was the image of an ink pot done in brush and black ink on white paper. I asked Etel to do some drawings of pots. One of the drawings was perfect--it was the only drawing that was going to be the cover. But it was at the same time massive--if we had printed that image in black and white it would have been too heavy.

So I had to solve the problem. It took days, I don't know how long, maybe a week or more. Suddenly I had the answer--the pot was to be printed light on dark. So we got a clear, light grey. So that it would shine.

KR: Almost as if the image were being erased? It has a glowing effect . . . almost haunting, like an after-image.

SF: I wanted that. I had that in my painting. Something that reverberates off the surface to make it alive. And in that book we absolutely made it. For *Mezza Voce*, it had been the same. We had to use that particular image. Somehow the ink pot has all the dramatic effect of her writing--you know, the ink well, like something you just fall into.

KR: It's a very effective cover--there's a sense of movement in it, too, which is odd since the image is of a stationary object.

SF: We kept the image of the ink pot exactly the same size as it was done. That's why we kept the cover white behind the ink pot and used pale green on top for the name--cutting the cover at one third and two thirds, which I had not seen done before.

KR: That's true, you have published a number of books where you have used the size of the page and the size of the book itself as a plastic element that can change.

SF: Yes, the cover usually decides the shape of the book. For Georgina's book, *Home For The Summer*, for instance, the cover drawing was really also an abstract interpretation of the story. I also remember that only one typeface went with that text.

KR: Yes.

SF: I tried many types, and only California was the one. We had to go to another typesetter because she had that type. So, it is so interesting... all these details. I don't think we ever used the same type twice.

KR: Is there a certain number of books you like to do each year, or does that matter?

SF: I try to do at least two books a year. And now we are doing more. Including the small series, we did four last year, and four this year.

KR: Do you know how long you are going to continue publishing?

SF: I have a commitment to these books and they have to stay alive. And so . . . I will go on.

KR: I have to admit, distribution is probably the one aspect of publishing that I find the hardest to do.

SF: I agree with that.

KR: The advertising, the pushing. We've both had a lot of experience with Small Press Distribution, a very nice place to have our books.

SF: Our books definitely have to be there because the audience for our books is there. But I would love the books to be in all kinds of bookstores, because in my life I encountered a lot of important books just by browsing in a bookstore . . . I think real readers still browse, and that's so important.

KR: I agree. It's very important.

SF: Another thing I believe in is word-of-mouth, because that is also one of the best ways for people to learn about books. It takes a long time, but it works.

KR: Actually, you know, just having somebody read a book on the subway is the best advertising. I think if we could afford it, we should hire an actor to ride the subway every day and read one of our books.

SF: Let's do that! [Laughter] It could be a performance.

KR: Tell me about the cover for *The Journey To Mount Tamalpais*.

SF: Etel had done a drawing of the mountain on an envelope and I wanted to use that drawing in its exact size for the cover. But I had to crop both sides in order to make it fit. Then I used the whole drawing for the back cover, in a reduced version, so it gave the impression that you had a close-up image on the front and a faraway image on the back. This aesthetic device could only be done at the expense of having no blurbs on the back. So I took a risk, and the book was published without blurbs.

KR: It's funny because I did the same thing with my first book, David Gilbert's *Five Happiness*. In fact, it was almost a political point not to have a blurb--it felt very subversive.

SF: Of course, I didn't know how much it would hurt sales. It hurt because bookstores didn't know where to put it. In which section. How about you, what was the response?

KR: Same thing. Exactly the same thing.

SF: Claude Royet-Journoud says that he would like to publish a book of blurbs. He says that there is a whole literature of the outside, a literature of blurbs.

KR: Will you always publish?

SF: Yes. That's why you have to be careful before you start anything. [Laughter] Because then you are stuck. I've discussed it with Rosmarie Waldrop, and she feels the same. Our responsibility to the books. And to the readers!

KR: There is a sort of communication that happens between a reader and a book that is becoming more important. But I also feel very optimistic; I think there are a lot of quality books being made now.

SF: Oh yes. And writers, writing.

KR: What has been your best experience as a publisher?

SF: Success-wise, sales-wise--the publishing of *Sitt Marie Rose*. It was an important book that was also timely. It came out as a response to a major event, the Civil War in Lebanon, and so the very necessity of what it was saying carried the book along--and still carries it.

You know, *Sitt Marie Rose* is still being reviewed, even after all these years. It came out in 1982. And I never put out a single ad for it. It moved on its own, by word of mouth. And it's taught at many universities every year--its academic success I had not foreseen at all. We still continue to receive letters from students addressed to *Sitt Marie Rose*, as if she were an actual person.

The book we did on Rûmî, *RÛMÎ and Sufism*, did well, too, which was nice, personally, since I had done the translation.

Barbara Guest's book, *Quill, Solitary Apparition*, won an Americas award in 1996.

And every time one of our books gets a good review, that's like winning a prize!

KR: How does your relationship with Etel Adnan affect what you do as a publisher?

SF: The relationship helps in many ways, in the fact that she helps me with the process, with blurbs, with reading proofs. And we work together on the covers. Many of the drawings are hers. And the strength of her images is the most important part of the beauty of the covers. Her brushwork has reached a perfection that only great calligraphers have.

She's also very good counsel.

KR: Do you think that your publishing has affected her writing?

SF: I don't know. When a writer has a publisher right there for her, who really likes her work, it can make her work more freely. On the other hand, during the war in Lebanon, Etel had to stop her work as a journalist and teacher because she had received death threats for having written *Sitt Marie Rose*. She lost her job, and she had to leave the country--it was natural that she would devote all her energies to writing.

KR: What has been your worst experience as a publisher?

SF: I don't want to say, since the people involved might be reading this. [Laughter] What was your worst experience?

KR: I'm not sure. Probably the discovery of a typographic error. I have nightmares about those.

SF: Do you have a lot in your books?

KR: I don't want to say. [Laughter]

SF: Well, I don't want to say that I have none--because then I'll be sending myself the evil eye and I'll start making some.