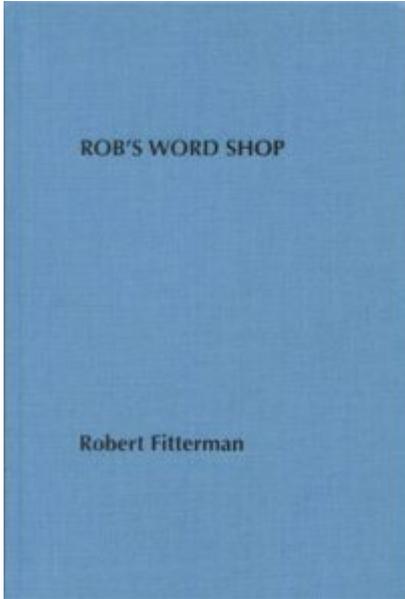


Review: Rob's Word Shop by Robert Fitterman

written by Guest Contributor | July 9, 2020



Rob's Word Shop by Robert Fitterman
[Ugly Duckling Presse](#), April 2109

For a few weeks during the spring of 2010, Robert Fitterman sold individual letters, words, and phrases from a small south-facing storefront at 308 Bowery in lower Manhattan. For 50 cents a letter or \$1 a word, Fitterman, a poet, hand-wrote or typed up his goods for 40 or so customers, many of whom arrived at their selection with his assistance. Bound in sky-blue book cloth, *Rob's Word Shop* assembles the ledgers and transcriptions, and even the carbon-copy receipts from this poetic pop-up shop. These documents, which comprise the bulk of Fitterman's newest work, are meticulous. From a printer cartridge to the tip for a turkey sandwich, the ledgers track nearly every dollar spent and earned. The transcriptions of his transactions with 40 or so customers record the nuances in his sales pitch and temperament, as well as the quickened or prolonged conversations that unfolded over the 11 days that the shop was in operation. The entry from the opening day reads:

Left apartment at 10 AM. Picked up computer from friend's house at 10:15. Took taxi to 308 Bowery (\$4.50) and arrived at 10:45. Set up printer, completed signage, and opened at 11:00 AM. Customer 1 arrived at 11:10 as a couple. Together they ordered a combination of single words, multiple words, and letters for a total of \$26.00. The words and phrases they purchased were:

goat

Heather Christle

The SEASIDE!

Minutes

Books

Walser & Company

...

The recording did not work for customer 1, so unfortunately there is no transcript of the conversation.

Customer 2 arrived around 11:50 AM. This customer purchased 2 words for \$2: interpolation and selfhood...

Total sales: \$29.00

True to its form, the ledger records income and expenses sans subjectivity, not even a single note. As a shopkeeper, Fitterman remains cool and detached with his esoteric clientele without ever seeming rude, even as some of his customers poke fun at the meta aspects of his performance, which, he admits in the middle of his project, is an exploration of poetry and consumerism. This may be totally naive of me, but I would expect a book about poetry and money to address such questions as, *How can a poet make a living solely off their work? How might poetry gain a better footing within our global economy? How do the currencies of language and money collide?* While Fitterman's work clearly raises questions about poetry and capitalism, *Rob's Word Shop* provides no commentary aside from the quips made by his customers, and of course, the afterword by this shop's archivist, which was commissioned by Fitterman, himself. Fitterman, during his shop's run, focuses his efforts on facilitating the transaction: *What letter, word, or words do you want? Do you want your words hand-written or printed? Would you like a folder or envelope to carry your purchase?* It should come as no surprise that this pop-up was not financially sustainable, nor was it ever intended to be. Rather, this pop-up stems from the poet's longstanding conceptual art practice. The transcriptions contain a subtle mixture of humor, acuity, sadness, deftness, befuddlement, irony, curiosity, annoyance, seriousness, and cleverness. *Rob's Word Shop* doesn't read like poetry, yet the heightened attention paid to language by the poet and the public throughout does produce acute mediations on language, intentionality, and worth.

Many of Fitterman's customers welcome if not expect the shopkeep/poet to have a hand in what letter, word, or words they ultimately purchase. This collaborative element does create a dynamic that exhibits what poet Monica de la Torre writing about Google Translate calls a "generative swerve".

CUSTOMER 29: ok, I want you to interfere with it

ROB: ok, good

CUSTOMER 29: or edit it, or do something with it

ROB: now if I'm going to interfere, it's going to be major

CUSTOMER 29: oh it is

ROB: well it might be... it might be disruptive

CUSTOMER 29: it might be disruptive?

ROB: like if you want it to make sense... is that... do you want it to make sense?

CUSTOMER 29: well I want you to think about this phrase being spoken... and maybe if you're really listening to the sound of the language you might imagine that voice articulating an idea about an invitation that might be to something, ok? ... an invitation would have to be an invitation to a film... does that kind of limit it more... so it's someone expressing an invitation to a film... so what's important is the subject of the film thinking Buckminster... Buckminster Fuller

In this instance the exchange only slightly changed the phrase from "Would you like to join us for the Buckminster Fuller screening at the Guggenheim on Thursday night?" to "Are you going to the Guggenheim for the Buckminster Fuller film, or what?" The dynamic exchange yields minor results. Put another way the exchange—or the swerving, itself—generates a site for poetic inquiry.

A few of the transcribed conversations play out the melodrama of writing, itself. The shopkeep and customer work through ambiguity, inflection, distraction, doubt, impulse, entanglement, levity in an effort to make meaning. For example, the first customer on Day 7 doubles down on their word choice even after a small development takes place and a question about execution arises.

CUSTOMER 16: quotation marks

ROB: quotations marks as a... as a word or as the actual mark?

CUSTOMER 16: uh, I'm not sure... I'm not even sure if it's one letter or two... you tell me

ROB: ok... here's exciting news that I have for you and it's especially exciting because you said what's the special today... all marks of punctuation are free... there's no charge for marks of punctuation!... so we can think about that and we can think about the

word... there're two words... quotation marks is two words...

CUSTOMER 16: hmm

ROB: but then there is just " " (quotation marks), which are free

CUSTOMER 16: yeah, that's what I want

ROB: that's what you want?

CUSTOMER 16: either free or not

ROB: they are free.. quotation marks are free, so you... you, um, so let's start there and you still get to make some requests even though they're free... would you like them with a marker, a pen, or a printer?

CUSTOMER 16: um that's up to you

ROB: ok, I like the pen... um, would you like them horizontal or vertical?

CUSTOMER 16: in the air

The problems that Fitterman and his customers work through are comical, in that they draw attention to assumptions and differing notions regarding figurative language. In doing so Fitterman and his customers highlight a range of attachments and possibilities for thinking about language, this malleable and abstract form we all share. One of the pleasures of reading the transactions of *Rob's Word Shop* is musing over these moments when Fitterman and his customers sort through the confusion and ambiguities of language.

While many of the purchases recorded in this archive start the same way—with the buyer giving their order or asking how to order—many of the purchases end uniquely. Some customers ask friendly questions. Others express satisfaction with their purchase. A few simply take their order and leave. The customer who purchased, "Simulacra" ends curiously.

ROB: ok, so we got one word and that's one of my favorite words, not to be prejudiced... for one dollar, one dollar... now you get one more, ok you don't even have... you see now... usually now I offer... whether you... would like a, uh, envelope or folder... but you don't need it, you got a...

CUSTOMER 26: yeah it does in the book

ROB: exactly

CUSTOMER 26: you know things rarely fall out of a book... usually I stash a little money in there... Metrocard...

ROB: that's interesting

CUSTOMER 26: I think people would be wary that...

ROB: ...it's like a wallet

CUSTOMER 26: ...valuable things would fall out...

ROB: ...yeah

CUSTOMER 26: ...but absolutely not

ROB: yeah, yeah, very good, very secure, all right, very good... so, um I hope you're satisfied?

CUSTOMER 26: totally

Here, Fitterman and the customer share in this quirk of attending to their belongings. Moments like these shed light on how other book-lovers go about their lives, rendering something that poets of all stripes can appreciate: finesse.

This book is written against the grain of most other poetry books. It's an artifact of a performance of a work by a conceptual poet—not a collection or a volume, but an archive. And like any archive, the researcher is the one who supplies the lens, or the drive to sort through the contents. So, in these exchanges between this poet and, um, other poets, mostly, I caught myself assigning archetypes to the different speakers, who aside from the shopkeep are unidentified, namely: partner, student, friend, close friend, pedestrian, painter, boss, enthusiast, drummer; and, with a flight of imagination: jerk, scholar, devil, pokemaster, oracle. The journalist who asked not to be recorded ordered the word, "escape." A customer who ordered "panda" and "mudkip" ordered "witchypoo" and "marijuana." Other customers ordered odd words and phrases like "goat," "Factory Hallow," "nachleben," "feldspar and gones," "BEANS DEAR?," "earlobe," "puella," "seabed," "tubular". Other orders included language that seems more familiar. Their selection seems to be more involved given that these words were meant to be shared as a gift, memento, or decoration. These words and phrases include, "S" "LANDSCAPE," "antique," "Simulacra," "dress circle," "the madness of decision," "Robert M. Fitterman," "mouth (with an additional e at the end and an n underneath and the letters o and n were hand-written over the ut of mouth)", "On errands of life, these letters speed to death." I wonder what has since happened to the words like "Factory Hallow" or "Pichler," which was written in cursive. All in all, *Rob's Word Shop* is for those of us who delight in neighborly eavesdropping, who enjoy the intimacies of observing the world from our stoops. It is deeply amusing to observe the on-goings of this short lived pop-up where poetry, however briefly, moved toward the center of public life.



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