

Françoise Khoury

Literature Outside Books

A new festival entitled *Extra*¹ was launched this autumn at the Centre Pompidou. This famous institution, a museum, is bringing to light a practice that has been little known these last twenty years: Writers who associate writing with other artistic media.

These French authors combine writing with photography, sound or performance. Some of them are considering the materiality of the book as a link in a process and not as an end result. Some others are definitely against publishing. The practice of non-publishing is not only a way of opening up to innovative forms and experiment, it is also a political statement that is reconsidering the traditional system of writer-publisher-bookshop-readers. It is a way of contesting the overwhelming domination of the commercial novels published by big publishers. All other forms of writing are marginalized. At the same time, on the artist's side, we see more artists attracted to putting texts in their

¹ *Extra-Festival des littératures hors du livre*. (www.centrepompidou.fr)

media or writing books. We are witnessing a trend among artists using literature as a model to nourish their work. Many art schools are now proposing creative writing to their art students, and workshops directed by writers. This is quite new in France where media disciplines are traditionally and strictly separated.

In past centuries, when the majority was unable to read and write, reading was an oral practice. Somebody was reading out loud for those who gathered to listen. Having a book in hand and being alone while reading came later on. The Modern Age enabled the appearance of the idea of private life.²

As the scholars Olivia Rosenthal and Lionel Ruffel³ wrote: the format of a book has a role in the way people write and read. The book or printed literature has been a major format since the invention of printing; it was the best way to transmit ideas. Today we see some writers following the method of some contemporary artists who are considering the process more important than the goal in itself. For these writers the exhibition or the spoken word or visual poetry means experiencing literature in spaces like museums, streets, or art galleries usually devoted to art. Therefore, these writers are gaining recognition outside the traditional printed format.

This recognition is limited to a small audience, and is of-

2 P. Aries, G. Duby, *Histoire de la vie privée*, 5 vol., Seuil, 1985–1987. Philippe Aries demonstrates in the introduction of the third volume that since the 18th Century the will of being alone in order of knowing oneself is linked to reading and writing.

3 O. Rosenthal, L. Ruffel, «La littérature exposée», in *Littérature*, 2010/4, n°160.

ten targeted by traditional critics who judge it as a signal of the end of literature. But for Rosenthal and Ruffel if these authors are criticized, it is because the choice they have made is to challenge the domination of a style of published narratives. Only novelists are well represented in the mass media and awarded various literary prizes. The novel is reducing literature to narratives and printed books, as if the two words literature and novel were similar. The publishing industry has a standardized system that excludes writing that does not fit in.

Publishers are uncertain with texts that are not easy to classify in a category as attested to by a remark I once heard; a publisher said that these types of books are a bother in a bookshop because “we don’t know on which shelf to put them”. This remark confirms that it is not easy for a writer to publish hybrid texts. Therefore these authors are in a way struggling against “conventional storytelling”.

To have a social existence the writer must be visible and have a role in the social life. Traditionally a writer has only a relationship with a publisher; it is not enough anymore. The writer must encounter her/his audience by being present at festivals, signings, sometimes stage performances or conducting creative writing workshops. Paradoxically, these authors try to disconnect literature from books and change the relationship with their publishers, and at the same time, they accept to perform in cultural institutions; these performances can be perceived as cultural entertainment which they are supposed to criticize. But for these authors there is a distinction between a TV show for commercial exposure and a performance in art institutions where they present their work to the readers in a different way.

WRITERS

Spoken word

Bernard Heidsieck (1928-2014), a pioneer in the spoken word and *poésie action*, decided in 1950's that poetry should get out of books. He decided to speak as a stand up poet, and use a recording device as a tool. He named it "poetry action". His idea of action is that the poet's body is involved, it's not just a simple reading of a text, it is the body of a poet in action. Another poet, Julien Blaine (b.1942) is defining his performances as "poetry in the flesh".

Many texts of contemporary poetry are difficult to read because they are very enigmatic. Listening to these texts make them accessible, like listening to a rhythm that reveals an underneath meaning. The genre of poetry is closely associated with the act of reciting; poetry reading is not then considered secondary but part of the text, its own medium. The question is: What to do with the body?

Inevitably, the body is performing while reading in front of an audience. Some poets try their best to be as unexpressive as possible. They tend to erase the body in order to let the voice carry the text. The poet Christian Prigent puts it this way, "This is to hear the voice of what is written instead of the poet's voice." Over these last years, we have seen an incredible increase in public readings in France⁴, and the old *Maison de la poésie* (*house of poetry*) created in 1983 was renamed five years ago as "literary scene". In addition to poetry readings, the *Maison de la poésie* schedules

4 See Gaelle Théval, «Écouter la poésie?», in *Dire la poésie*, J.P.Puff (dir.), ed.C. Dufaut, 2015.

music concerts and uncategorized events like the “literary naps”! (to lay down in the dark while listening).

An innovative poet, who is still inspiring for the new generation, is Christophe Tarkos (1963-2004); Instead he published in magazines in the early 1990s and many of the texts were oral improvisations at first; the poem was made in public, as a work in progress. These texts are hybrid: fragments of stories, thoughts, but overall repetition of words phonetically close, like in one of his poems, “tambour” and “tombola” (drum and tombola). As he repeats the words it creates a funny impression (we can hear the audience laughing) and it makes us think of the meaning of words. It becomes clear what he means by *pâte-mot* (word-paste or word-pastry). As if the language is a jar of mixing words. It is up to the poet to choose which one will be associated with another one. This idea of “word-paste” makes Tarkos a subversive author always questioning the meaning of language.

Another writer, Emmanuelle Pireyre (b. 1969) is placing her work in a political field. She explains that as we live like witnesses in an over-connected world, political action is not so obvious. Maybe literature can lead people taking action. The document has an important place in her poetry and performances. In one of her texts⁵ she introduces in a comic way what is literary creativity and the document’s place. She starts with a question: “How do I stop being a data victim? I’m a bit data victim, is there somebody who can help me?”

Then Pireyre exposes her vision of writing:

5 Emmanuelle Pireyre, Un environnement assez contraignant pour les datas , Inculte, 2014.

I was observing the literary creativity and I stacked it by genre in boxes labeled: novel, poetry, theatre, etc... slightly separated. I was doing my best to transform this frontier between boxes in a porous zone where I could live. Since then, things have changed. There is a well-known phenomenon: While the levels are overlapped they tend to mix like a marble cake before baking. The same for Data in contemporary literature: documents, archives, numbers, all the information on Internet. They are a heavy dead weight of reality. That is why we should use them in a parsimonious way. Data in literature should be part of a miscellaneous construction. And instead of choosing clear explanations and argumentations I prefer the odd language of poetry. Poetry could be our man. A thought throughout materiality.

This text is questioning the information society and how the media are transmitting this information. Supposed facts; they are not, because they are partial. And poetry is working on language, struggling against ideologies.

Performance

To stand up. Being on stage. This posture is theatrical. The boundaries between artistic practices are difficult to define. Dramatic art is often inspired by famous classical texts, it is thus literature and yet it differs from performances in poetry that include some improvisation. I recently attended a reading of poetry by an actor. If I compare it to readings by poets of their own texts I can make a difference: The actor, even if s/he doesn't move on stage, is at ease with the body,

have a consciousness of his body, while poets emphasize only their voice. I must say I am troubled by the actor's posture and do not listen well to the words. On the contrary, some poets - accustomed to reading out loud in front of an audience - have a very sober way of delivering their texts that make the words powerful. Their voice, either sweet or strong, has an impact that I find captivating. The voice of a poet is not similar to the voice of an actor.

An original writer-performer is Jean-Yves Jouannais (b. 1964). Founder with two collaborators of the literary journal *Perpendiculaire* in 1995 (this review lasted only few years), he wrote a book two years later entitled *Artistes sans oeuvre* (*artists without works*), a prophetic title of what he would later engage in. Indeed, in 2008 he started a work in progress by deciding to dedicate himself to a unique oral project called *L'encyclopédie des guerres* (*encyclopedia of wars*). First, he exchanged books about war with people in various places; any kind of books, either literary, or military, or sociological, or memoirs, or documentary. He chose an entry following the alphabet (for example: amazon, barricade, cooking pot, execution). Jouannais spoke about it once a month in a stage-designed conference at the Centre Pompidou, where, while he was talking, the audience could see some images on a screen. He presented it as a book being written in public but without the intention of publishing it; like an unaccomplished work. He claimed his illegitimacy concerning this field:

"I'm just an amateur, a writer, even a character and I don't know how to write a novel". He went on adding, "This war encyclopedia is the best way I found to produce literature

without writing books”.

Jouannais compares his work to an investigation slightly fictionalized. He tries to reduce the experience of literature to something very thin and see what is left from literature.

In these conferences a section is improvised. After the word is chosen for the evening he starts to talk about it, and gives quotes from the books he has read about this word in a book about war. He is not always sitting, sometimes he gets up, walks on stage, shows a picture. He asserts that this performance, which has lasted for some year now, can be compared to tinkering. He doesn't know how to define it or when it will stop.

This project is questioning the writer's legitimacy, as there is no book and no intention of publishing. Therefore, Jouannais says that he does not know what is his position in literary circles. The only thing he is sure about is that he would like to spend his life devoted to this project, inventing and dreaming on stage a world history of wars. He presents himself as a compiler who is creating a shape. He claims to have become a character in his project, and that this project became his life. He even has a kind of “fan club” now; so all this is becoming a kind of permanent happening? Like some experiences in contemporary art? The fact that he is also a curator and writes in art reviews gives him flexibility in his projects. An accurate definition of this kind of performance could be the one given by the curator and teacher Nicholas Fourgeaud⁶:

6 N. Fourgeaud, «De quelques usages récents de la littérature par la performance: B. Seror, L. Hervé et C. Maillet», in *La tentation littéraire de l'art contemporain*, P. Mougin (dir.), Les Presses du réel, 2017.

The performer who benefits from visibility is building his artistic “persona” in the field of contemporary art while adopting the position of a literary texts author.

Visual poetry

Associating words and pictures are practiced more often by visual artists than writers. The pioneer among poets is Denis Roche (1937–2015), who started to write poetry in the early 1960’s; he was then close to literary reviews of the avant-gardes, like *Tel quel*, (1960–1982)⁷ before deciding twenty years later to stop writing poetry arguing that “poetry is unacceptable”. In this provocative statement his idea was to criticize the tendency of sentimentalism and lyricism that was invading poetry. Denis Roche changed into photography. But writing was still there in a way, with some of his works associating in the same frame texts and photography. His work was a kind of photographic diary, an autobiographical journey and he also wrote an essay about visual studies.

In the following generation we can quote Suzanne Doppelt (b. 1956) who still relies on books to assemble her writings and photography. She created with Pierre Alferi a literary journal *Detail* that lasted a few years. She is active in creative writing workshops. She once led a workshop in a zoo maybe because animals are present in her writings. Participants were invited to write and also to go for a walk to see the animals.

⁷ For the history of this literary review, see Philippe Forest, *Histoire de Tel quel*, Seuil, 1995.

Her partner Pierre Alferi (b. 1963) is working more on the performance side. He sometimes performs on stage, and he is also teaching in an art school. He composed *Ciné-poèmes* (texts-films) and published this work on DVD. *Ciné-poèmes* has been presented in poetry festivals. In this work, he explains that he was looking for a precise form to answer the question: Is there a cinematic way of writing? He composed short films made only of words giving a flickering effect showing the rhythm and animation with music in the background. Each word or group of words or sentences appears and disappears, out of phase, with a counted timing, no images or voices, a very sober and simple frame. There was no shooting with a camera; all the clips were directly composed with editing equipment. He used graphic fonts in terms of legibility instead of ornament (size, color, design of the letters). He says that his films are more like a verbal score or partition than a film. He doesn't consider that a film inspired by a poem or made by a poet, or where a poem is read off screen, is really poetry; in that case they are more like a "floppy illustration". He has a radical vision and *ciné-poème* as he perceives it, is made of words showed on screen. The screen allows assembling words in a different manner; outside books and adding music to it.

ARTISTS

The use of verbal signs in art goes back to the Dada movement followed in the 1940's by *Lettrism*, an artistic movement that gathered a group of poets who wanted to give importance to the letter instead of the meaning of words.

Thus their texts were given shape by the sound rather than the meaning. It became a fine arts movement where the visual aspect of letters was essential. Letters are graphic signs.

Nowadays, many young artists talk about literature as the source of their work. Some of them declare: If I feel transformed by a text I try to transform it in my work and I think of how to exhibit it. The artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster (b.1965) declares⁸ that she considers herself as a kind of failed writer, adding that she reads a lot and has a great passion for books; she is still amazed by the mystery of fiction: how to write it, how to begin, what to write. For her, the origin of her work takes its origin from literature and cinema.

In a recent book published on behalf of a colloquium, the scholar Pascal Mougin⁹ notes how art is disrupting the usual recognition of literature, of what is like being in the literary field. Mougin argues that it is not relevant to define where literature by artists starts and where it ends but the interesting thing is to observe how, by resisting categorization, art is working on the revitalization of literature. Artists who write are not reliant on the writer's status that must be recognized by his peers and other players in publishing. That gives them more freedom to take over the verbal. Mougin says that art points out the limits of the verbal language by drawing attention to what comes before language: graphic gestures, mental ideas and images that

8 See Enrique Vila-Matas, *Marienbad électrique*, Christian Bourgois, 2015.

9 Pascal Mougin (dir.), «La tentation littéraire de l'art contemporain», Les Presses du réel, 2017.

are not yet organized in a discursive manner, and sometimes shaping things that literature cannot give. Using verbal language in visual art is at the same time a question of legibility and visibility that produces a sensitive object for the spectator. Artists are synthesizing the esthetics and the function of language. Mougín reminds us of the chronology of these practices.

First in the 1960's the "narrative turn" applied to conceptual art where the text or verbalization was completely part of the work. As an example we can quote the group *Art&Language* created in England in 1967. Then in the 1990's the "pictorial turn" theorized by William J.T. Mitchell¹⁰ who considered that the visual became the model and that literature and all symbolic productions are understandable in their relation to pictures. This "pictorial turn" shows the disappearance of the great tales and the domination of images upon language with these images now interpreting the world. Is literature being put aside in this "pictorial turn"? Maybe not as we see more and more texts that include images.

The reception of this "new literature" must be analyzed. Readers tend to read faster with the Internet and the blogs. The production of short books is less expansive and we see an increase of self-published book that creates a dynamic of micropublishing. The necessity is to develop critical tools to understand these new stories. Critics, either art critic or literary critic, are used to analyze works of art within their field and with their traditional tools. Multidisciplinary works oblige to have a global approach.

10 William J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual representations*, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

However, one looks at it, all these practices either by writers, poets or artists, the Internet has modified our relation to the text, to the world; which the writer Kenneth Goldsmith¹¹ describes precisely as:

... Digitized language can be poured into any conceivable container: Text typed into a Microsoft Word document can be parsed into a database, visually morphed in Photoshop, animated in Flash, pumped into online text-mangling engines, spammed to thousands of e-mail addresses, and imported into a sound-editing program and spit out as music—the possibilities are endless. You could say that this isn't writing, and in the traditional sense, you'd be right. But this is where things get interesting: We are not hammering away on typewriters. Instead, focused all day on powerful machines with infinite possibilities, connected to networks with a number of equally infinite possibilities, writers and their roles are being significantly challenged, expanded, and updated.

WRITING IN ART SCHOOLS

The French system in art schools has been amended and students must now write a thesis to present their plastic project. It is a written presentation of their research to prepare them to give a constructed discourse on an aesthetic

11 Kenneth Goldsmith, «Why Conceptual Writing? Why now?» in *Against Expression, An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, edited by G. Dworkin and K. Goldsmith, Northwestern University Press, 2011.

or historical point. A report from The *Direction Générale de la création artistique* (Board of Fine Arts) in June 2013 concluded that the thesis is the premise of a future work of art. The thesis sometimes takes the form of poetry, or free associations, or the style of an artist book¹². The institution also encourages this last form that has been appreciated by young students. It is a work that associates shape, artistic invention and theorization that brings a necessary distance to the work. To problematize one's own work, presenting questions and answers, is the main expectation asked of the student.

In France, nowadays about forty writers have a permanent position in art schools. Surveys analyzing how fine arts graduates contribute to innovation concluded that these students have an inclination to innovation because they are able to mix different practices in many disciplines. The purpose of this policy is to prepare students for various professional fields. Not all of them will find their place as an artist in a ferociously competitive field.

The writer François Bon¹³ gives some examples of his work as a writing teacher in an art school. First, convince students that writing can be learned. And to learn is to practice. When Bon gives his students some clues inspired by contemporary poets, it is not because they are the only models, but because their writing escapes from traditional forms; traditional narratives are restrictive for young people overwhelmed by patrimonial writers. Helping students

12 A work of art shaped as a book and produced as one of a kind object.

13 François Bon, «20 remarques sur écrire en école d'art», in *Culture et recherche*, n°130, hiver 2014–2015.

to demystify classical writers is part of an educational path. By showing the students some manuscripts of writers, before the time of computers, they can see that the visual design is like a drawing. Sometimes, students say they never write but they would like to. So François Bon asks them to show their notebook where there are a lot of notes; it's a way to teach them that writing begins here in the notebook. In other words, they are not searching from the right place and the teacher's work is to show them that.

Another writer, Jérôme Mauche¹⁴, who also teaches in an art school, declares that there is surely a great interest about literature among his students; and specifically for contemporary poetry. Poetry does not need a lot of financial or material means. Students are keen to know about visual poetry or spoken word poetry. They try and they dare to incorporate text to their work, fragments or pieces of dialogues. They make films, sounds and performances. This way of trying different medias is not considered dubious anymore. As if poetry became desirable for Contemporary art. Refreshed poetry is becoming contemporary art in its own right. Helpless facing the task of writing a thesis, art students, who don't have the knowledge of academic writing, are taking whatever they can, including their personal writings. The result is intriguing and maybe illegitimate but it produces an assemblage of narrative and documents, close to forms of the avant-garde poetry.

Another artist-writer, the photographer Arnaud Claass¹⁵

14 Jérôme Mauche, « Il se passe quelque chose », in *Culture et recherche*, n°130, hiver 2014–2015.

15 Arnaud Claass, *La considération photographique*, Filigranes, 2017.

who has taught in the School of Photography in Arles, points out some questions related to this rule: can we ask students to write arguments while creating? The institution has developed a connection between university and the artistic world. This was apparently perceived as an arranged marriage by the two groups. In art schools the idea of evolution is taking an important role. To be evaluated the student must conceptualize his work, and Claass says that any good professor knows that in art there are some moments where there is not much to say, and yet the creative process is still moving. Some students are apparently satisfied, saying that this conceptual writing is helping them to “clarify their ideas”, even if it takes from their time of creation. Claass is judging this as a kind of accepting a disciplined path. The choice is choosing comfort instead of audacity. Teachers know that if we always rationalize creativity we take an artistic risk: not taking artistic risks anymore. Teaching should get students emancipated, and not only measuring their skills. It is as if the institution is showing to the students: Yes, be free but explain clearly if not philosophically what you are doing and why. Claass criticizes this form of authoritarianism and adds that creativity or art creation must keep an unexplained zone, a zone of shadow.

Teaching brings income to writers and artists. Some consider teaching as an improvement, others feel that it takes away time from writing and creating. Another option is to exhibit in famous museums, because it gives flexibility and recognition and also a larger audience.

To conclude, we can ask, what are the issues for museums to host writers and poets. Nowadays, museums are not only custodians of ancient books, original editions and

early printed book. Whether exhibiting contemporary art or classical art or ancient art, all of the museums have an active educational policy. They cannot be limited to restoration, conservation and exhibition. Today the museum is a lively place, a reference point, and a meeting place. Museums must offer to more and more varied audiences cultural and educational activities. For a lot of people, the visit to the museum is now the standard for a cultural outing. Museums are coping with the increased frequentation and must take into account that visitors have different levels of knowledge. Curators agree to predict that in the future, the museums will be and must be multidisciplinary. Literature is incorporated within this framework. While the ways of circulation and valorization of literature are questioned, entering the museum gives visibility to literature and the chance to reach more readers.

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I am leading creative writing workshops since late 90's, specifically writing and photography.

I am teaching writing as a freelance to various audiences in various places like teens in schools or associations, prisoners, readers in libraries, photographers during cultural events, visitors in museums.

I have studied History and Political Science. Putting documents into narrative forms was my first interest. I then moved to fiction. I spent time to look after new and innovative forms of fiction specially those who are less linear. Photography, which can be compared to a flash, seemed to me the best way to get rid of chronology and linear narrative. Assembling text and photography seemed to me as an exploration of different temporalities.

I have published short stories in literary reviews and a photo-text book.

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