

Interview with Jérôme Game

THIS INTERVIEW with Jérôme Game and Nina Parish took place in Paris, June 11, 2018.

We're interested in poetry's relationship with other disciplines and creative practices—poetry and its others—and we're thinking about how it moves externally to produce new forms, how poets, writers, and/or artists are defining themselves in relation to what they're doing with language. So, in relation to these aims, of poetry and its porous boundaries and these others, how would you situate your own work?

What's interesting in your question is that it underplays the ontological in favour of the pragmatic. And I very much recognize myself in this game plan. As a poet and a writer, I am very sensitive to other arts and media. The influence they have on my work has intensified over the years. Following the publication of my first collections in the early 2000s, I started to focus more specifically on four sites of interaction between poetry and other arts/media: sounds (as voice, noise or music, live or recorded, *in situ* or edited), the body (talking, performing, choreographed, filmed), the image (moving or still, digital or printed), and the stage (alone or with others, next to screenings, dancers or musicians). This led me to collaborate with visual artists for videopoems and installations as well as with stage performers for public readings. Capturing codes from other formal languages and then retranslating them into my own vernacular led my work into what I call a *poetics of frontiers*: a continuation of writing by other means.¹ Correspondences, adaptations and reappropriations between languages, practices and modalities: it's amidst these gaps that my poetry retools itself and refines its project. From a pragmatic perspective, that means a variety of formats and media: collections of poems, books of essays, CDs of sound poetry, a DVD of videopoems, posters, visual installations and public performances, on my own or with dancers and musicians.² Most recently I've been closely observing the tools and operations of photography (both analogical and digital) as well as its material economy (the exhibition, the screen, the wall). Poetry can exist very well outside the page. Yet I read this exit as a capacity to exceed the page rather than as an exodus with no turning back. I'm interested in it mainly as a power, a faculty, not as an eschatological gesture of sorts obsessed with its own historicity and from which there'd be no turning back. This way of thinking misses the motility of modernism that it tries to capture. For me rather, poetry's relationship to the page

becomes adaptable, changeable, depending on local strategies and pursuits: we can leave it the better to reoccupy it, and vice versa. This defines a pragmatics of sites or grounds through an open dialectics between linguistic and non-linguistic signs, that is to say through a *series of rapports* between language (in the strict sense) and languages (in the semiotic sense).

Could you tell me about your own practice which explores these ideas?

I'd say that when I work with video artists, choreographers, stage directors, and gallery owners, I learn *there* (in our collaborations, our videopoems, exhibitions, etc.) how to refine or reboot my work *here* (with a pen in my hand, on paper). I don't hierarchise between these two dimensions because my true site as a poet is in fact made of the journeys in between them, between *here* (the actual writing) and (many) *theres*.

Examining the ways in which a filmmaker with whom I collaborate on a videopoem builds her frame, how she edits a narrative, how she synchs noises and music for a soundtrack, etc., all of that will help me formulate issues pending in the text I'm writing. As a poet, I seek to expose my writing reflexes to other syntaxes, other grammars, other setups, other economic ecosystems too, other technological line-ups. And I expect these 'alien' grammars and technological setups to inform my writing, redo it in both senses of the French version of this word : *refaire* as rewire and undo, undermine until a resistance, a *pharmakon* of sorts is invented... I'll give you some concrete examples. When I work with a film-maker we'll be in front of her computer screen and she'll have rushes that I have taken with my phone or collected on YouTube, or that she has taken, and her craft—I care for this notion giving value to what lies concretely behind professional identitarian inscriptions—her craft, her gestures will sound to my ear like “this is a rectangle,” “this is a timeline,” “here's a series of devices with which I can move light, sound, rhythm,” etc. And here, I'm reminded that my own toolbox is made up of twenty-six letters that tend to be printed black on white once organised into words, that tend to be read from left to right, tend to reside in dictionaries, tend to be used by politicians or marketing executives, in commercials in the street, in novels sitting in stores and libraries, in legal codes, etc. So I come with all of this in my pockets, that's part of my technological baggage. And I see how I can expand my toolbox from this position. I'm obviously not seeking to essentialise anyone here, neither myself nor the various artists I work with. What I'm after is an encounter between practices, between tools, methods, and fabrics. An ethnography of sorts: that's how I see the time spent with a colleague in a recording or photographic studio, in an editing booth or rehearsing in a per-

formance hall. Like time spent in some lab that we've built through the differences between our respective practices. Nine times out of ten it is cognitively and artistically very rich. The point is to see how the terms in which I'll retranslate what I've 'discovered' and 'learned' in the said lab will impact how I write future texts. The idea of translation is a very good metaphor here. I remember once being asked by a festival to prepare a duet with a dancer. And so he calls me and says, "Come to my studio," and he puts me on a stage under a lot of light and in front of a mirror and asks, "So what exactly can you do with your body?" For two long days I was completely mute with my body, thoroughly untrained (and unversed) as I am in such things. It was an awkward, humbling moment of the ethnographic encounter between practices/tribes that are completely different in the gestures they each perform 'naturally'. Yet to some extent I seek this. I seek these moments of displacement when what I can do by reflex with my linguistic tools will not be particularly relevant at first. Thus calling for a reboot. Of course if I'm there on stage, in a recording booth or behind an editing screen it's because I wanted it in the first place and believe something can be gained from it. So the dancer told me, "Ok, so you're stuck as a rock behind your microphone... Can you move?" But what I really liked is when he said, "Ok, so in fact you're moving from the throat and the chest as you read rather than from the hips and legs. Your inertia is, well, some sort of sound/poetic choreography you've come up with. Let's see how we can work with that together," and it was very interesting. So the first thing I'd say is the moment of displacement, of estrangement.

Now, to multiply collaborations for me is not to multiply dexterities. On the contrary, it's to secure a moment of... *un moment de latence* where this displacement is going to reveal an awkwardness also active in language itself, in speaking itself, in the very act of phrasing or telling. After this first moment of estrangement there's going to be a moment of composition, or rewiring of expressive reflexes. The encounter with an actual dancer, film-maker, musician, etc. quickly becomes an encounter between grammars: her know-how, her toolbox and mine. This is what I mean by collaboration. Another example recently has been photography and the art of the exhibition. I'm currently finishing a book of photopoems, that is to say short prose texts describing in words images found on private mobile phones or in the media. On a few occasions this past year I have printed them on photographic paper of 60 × 60 or 100 × 40cm, which I have then hung on gallery walls, as if they were 'real' photographs for visitors to see/read. Sorting out the paper quality and height at which to hang them for people to experience them as photographs is a manner of inhabiting a foreign world and appropriating its language to my

own poetic ends. A bit like the cuckoo—so I'm told—makes its nest in other birds' nests! The organisation, the tools, the know-how, but also the *habitus* and the *Gestalt* of another type of practice is what I'm interested in... to displace it slightly by occupying it with something that is textual.

Squaring deconstructions and reconstructions of language across practices and disciplinarian fields: that might be a working definition of poetry for today. And I think that I have sought relationships with artists because, my poetry being already quite open-ended vis-à-vis language itself, quite deconstructed to start with, I saw in established grammars such as narrative montage or figurative photography a good way to reorient my poetics in a more narrative turn. As if the manner in which I travel through other fields to equip my poetic benchtop were the neo-modern way I've found to experience (i.e., to feel, to grasp) and negotiate (i.e., to make sense of, to represent) the anthropological shift from the post-modern to the post-postmodern that has taken place in the last forty years. I guess what I mean to say is that cognitive capitalism 4.0—i.e., acceleration of temporalities, de/re-materialisation of identities, *über*-technologizing of everything, etc.—is also (is foremost?) a re-circuiting of sensibility. And a decisive task for us poets today is to recognize that and address it.

Would you describe yourself as a poet, and your activity as poetry, as poetic practice?

Today I would answer yes to this question. Though I would often add “and writer” next to it. Probably because this word, “poet”, is still so overdetermined that I'm happy both to inhabit it and to keep a window open in it: “and” is vague enough as to the type of relation involved, and “writer” is sufficiently generic. But to return to “poet,” I answer yes because for example today, I feel part of the community you're making exist with this volume. I recognize and in turn feel recognized by colleagues and readers sharing common circumstances, common reflexes and intuitions. We cannot invent or inhabit a world such as this one on our own: we need echoes and voices. And my generation has done that. We can start conjugating this verb, “to do,” in the past. Something has happened in the last twenty or thirty years—it's been happening since at least Rimbaud of course. But we have done many things. Formally, institutionally, finding means where we could to present our findings—and I'm using those terms for a reason. We have publicly invented and offered poetry around common interrogations and in a shared time-space. And yes, poetry did leave the page for other *loci*, and did interact with many a practice and discourse along the way, from the stage to the screen to social sciences to the conference format to *lecture-performance* and videopoetry, etc.

It's at this place that I call myself a poet, in this overall mo(ve)ment that scholars will historicise, name, and describe more precisely than I can. Personally I feel I can use this word, "poet," because we have been several to invest it with the same stakes. I may be describing it with my own set of metaphors as I answer your questions, but I haven't dreamt such collective interrogations, pursuits, and gestures. I've seen them, heard them, read them, saw them experienced by colleagues, tried out by readers/spectators, and even received by institutions. Our (relative) number, our output, have, as it were, objectified this notion of a "poet" being a peripatetics of sensations and tools in relation to words and located firmly within the epoch. Mind you, that sounds generic enough a definition to cater for many epochs. And I don't mind that either.

Can you talk to me about performance?

I offer what I call *lecture-performances*, which are neither a performance in the sense of 1960's performative art or happenings, nor a public reading in the sense of oralising a text by reading out loud the way you would read in your head. The presence of an audience is important: I consider it as both a public and a readership in the sense that, rather than interpret my text like an actor would, I try to make moments of a whole language audible through the stories or thoughts or feelings that I'm actually telling/saying. The telling and the saying, the grammar and the motif, the *langue* and the *parole* are never disentangled, they always go hand in hand, for instance in a poked or erratic syntax, or through stuttering utterances/narratives. A *lecture-performance* is thus the in-between space (both physical and literary, spectacular and intimate, prepared and *brut*) where language-at-work or the play-of-language (poetry) can be directly heard.

So, tell me about other languages. You work between languages as well, and you were talking about this idea of the in-between. Can you tell me something about that in relation to multilingualism and translation?

Perhaps the first thing I should say is that when I was in England—where I lived for seven years while writing my PhD at Cambridge in the late 1990s and early 2000s—I translated my poems from French into English so as to be able to retranslate them from English to French. That is to say, to inseminate or fertilize them with something that is not them but will help them deliver becomings rather than mere significations. I feel that to speak a foreign language is to enlarge one's sensory/expressive toolbox, in this sense it's the same as what I was saying before about video art and cinema. As a translator,

you yourself argue that translating is to grasp the energy existing amidst sentences and discourses. I very much agree with that. Catching this foreign energy, getting in touch with it to use it later in another site, putting it to task on another desk, another text, cutting and pasting the momentums or framings, melodies or angle-shots that it's capable of, that is what I had in mind. A language is a workshop more than or in addition to any specific finished works to be found in it. To say it a bit foolishly: to speak in another language is like taking strong substances.

And it's a discipline of its own too, it's an intentional dive, requiring time and work, and that can offer new ways to refine what one has to say. I guess one can hear in all my answers how the issue of poetic transitivity—i.e., the expressive objects and cognitive pursuits that poetry tasks itself with, along with their ethical and political scope—is open-ended for me and can be addressed in multiple ways. I go back to this notion of poetry as being part of a cognitive anthropology of sorts: assembling new rapports between modes of perception/expression (of *savoirs*-discourses, practices, sensations) and thus reporting on new modes of “knowledge” (*connaissances*) in our epoch: I believe in that.

Practice is always tool-sensitive; and it's the same for poetry, for perceiving situations (material, cognitive, emotional, political, etc.) all around us, and for phrasing them. And when, like in my case, what's to be conveyed by the work has to do with life as pure movement, as dialectics between constancy and change, then one has to pay much attention to one's tools. If what I want to catch and render in my poems is the open-endedness of life across the full spectrum of its scales (from individual perceptions to collective political situations and back), then I must pay attention to how our basic sensorium (how we grasp differences and change around us) is evolving in the early 21st century. In *Salle d'embarquement*, the novel I published last year, I focus on how globalisation (that is to say space-time technologies) is affecting our perception of mundane as well as political or socio-economic realities in a very strong way. At first we don't know which tools will help us best document this shift, for it's ongoing as we write. What frame do we build to render our globalised world as we go through it more or less self-consciously? In my novel, it's images, both fixed (digital photography) and moving (TV programmes, film or found footage) that play this role. Simultaneously archaic and up-to-date, images carry much behavioural memory while also being a key site of innovation. Since the invention of cinema they join sounds, movement, and stillness. In other words, they're a truly great motif through which something of the epoch may be captured. *De facto* images are the language/technology

that has influenced me most both as a writer and a performer. I think it's because their specific dialectics—between posing a (relatively fixed) frame and linking it up (more or less quickly) to other images, on the walls of an exhibition, the editing of a film, or the pages of a catalogue—successfully reformulates the problems I struggle with as a writer between saying (*dire*) and telling (*raconter*), between the utterance and the narrative, the stasis and the flux, transitivity and intransitivity.

Jérôme Game is a French author of nine collections of poems, several CDs of sound poetry, a DVD of videopoems, and six volumes of essays. *Salle d'embarquement*, his first novel, came out in fall 2017. Also shown in exhibitions as visual/textual installations, his poetry explores the shapes and flows of contemporary experience via those of discourses, narratives, and images. Often collaborating with musicians, stage directors, and visual artists for collective performances, he regularly gives public readings of his work in Europe, North Africa, Asia, and the Americas. *Ovni(s)*, the play he co-wrote, premiered at the Avignon Festival in July 2018, and later this year *Flip-Book & Other Poems*, a volume of English translations of his work, will come out in London with Barque Press. He lives in between Paris and New York, where he teaches film studies at Columbia University.

Latest publications: *Salle d'embarquement* (L'Attente, 2017); *Développements* (Manucius, 2015); *DQ/HK* (book+2CD, L'Attente, 2013); *Sous influence : Ce que l'art contemporain fait à la littérature* (essay, Mac/Val, 2012). Website: www.jeromegame.com.

Notes

1. Such poetics is freely formalised in *Sous influence: Ce que l'art contemporain fait à la littérature*, a short essay published with the Presses of Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MAC/VAL) in 2012.
2. Details can be found on my website, www.jeromegame.com.