



Thinking Through Relation

Encounters in Creative Critical Writing

Edited by Florian Mussnug,
Mathelinda Nabugodi and Thea Petrou

Peter Lang

NEW COMPARATIVE CRITICISM

'Thinking Through Relation brings together an outstanding collection of essays that explore the diverse ways in which works of art and aesthetic experience generate a richness of relation which escapes the straightjackets of rigid disciplinary and institutional boundaries. Clearly demonstrating the creative potential of critical writing, these essays are a fitting tribute to the creativity, originality and subtlety of Timothy Mathews's scholarly accomplishment and his contribution to our understanding of art and of the aesthetic relation.'

– Dr Ian James, University of Cambridge

'This book in honour of Timothy Mathews is much more than a *Festschrift*. It is a collection of thought-provoking, daring insights into the crucial place of literature and the arts in our world and in our being human. It is an exhilarating multifarious demonstration of how creativity can undo, without for a moment losing intellectual rigour, the disciplinary and academic structures that constrain our thinking. Driven by curiosity and by care – love, even – the many contributions to the volume show, in their different ways, how criticism can be at its most effective by being at its most imaginative and its least predictable.'

– Professor Lucia Boldrini, Goldsmiths, University of London

This book is an offering. It contains eighteen essays in honour of Timothy Mathews, written by leading scholars in the fields of French, Comparative Literature, Visual Culture and Creative Critical Writing. These essays examine the power of serendipitous encounter between artists, thinkers and artistic media as well as the importance of creative interjection in the arts and humanities. They advance fresh interpretations of some important figures in twentieth-century European culture – Apollinaire, Beckett, Benjamin, Calvino, Dalí, Genet, Nooteboom, Roubaud – using modes of reading that are both intellectually brave and open to fragility, intimate as well as critical, at once playful and earnest. They bring texts and artworks into relation in order to amply demonstrate that relation itself is a form of thinking.

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Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • New York • Wien

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JÉRÔME GAME

Art and Literature; or, On a More or Less Permeable Membrane

An Interview

This interview with Jérôme Game was originally conducted by Elisa Bricco for *Publifarum* as part of an investigation into the relations between art and literature.¹ A series of questions was put to a group of writers and artists, asking them each to reflect on the creative potentialities opened up in the crossing of the boundaries demarcating disciplines and artistic practices. The result was a rich discussion on the fluidity between literary and artistic fields, and on the significance of collaboration. Elisa has previously written on Jérôme's work, showing particular interest in his visual poetics. She also invited him to Genoa, where he spoke about his own compositional processes and read his poetry.

EB: Many artists today are influenced by other forms of artistic creation. Do you think that the boundaries between the arts have disappeared in the world of contemporary creation? If so, what are the causes of this, in your opinion? Have you had the chance to work with other artists, or have you been influenced by other artists or other artistic forms, either contemporary or past? If so, whom or which?

JG: The question, for me, is not so much about the disappearance of the boundaries as about the relations that can be created between practices in order to revive, focus and equip a site of creation. Yet, in order to have relations between disciplines in their usages, the ways in which they

1 Originally published in French as 'Entretien avec Elisa Bricco', *La littérature et les arts. Paroles d'écrivain.e.s*, in M. Amatulli, E. Bricco, N. Murzilli, Ch. Rolla, eds, *Publifarum* 30 (2019). Translated into English by Thea Petrou.

capture and reformulate, there must be differences between them. Therefore the question of heterogeneity – of modalities, of tools to be used in creative processes – seems more useful to me. When boundaries are seen in this way, as signs or sites of differences, they permit advances in the form of new connections: what is interesting about a boundary is to work on what it means to cross it, the desire to cross it and what this act does to the person involved. For me, to cross a boundary is to (re)invent on the very spot where you find yourself. It is a bit of a paradox: you do not become something else, you continue to do what you were already doing but differently, by other means, as though approaching it from another angle. The problem is not the boundaries themselves, but rather that, at boundaries, you sometimes encounter customs officers at a loose end, with nothing better to do than ask for the documents identifying your discipline, just so that they can tell you they are not correct, or on the contrary, they might reproach you for having any in the first place. It depends on the ideology of the moment – purism, or pandisciplinarity. In other words, yes, the notion of disciplines can lead to the imposing of restrictive definitions based on identity, which risk pigeonholing or idealising an act or practice. And yet the practice of art calls equally for a framework of some substance, one which is imperfect, porous, relative to time and space, but real. Notions of going across (boundaries) and boundaries (to be crossed) could therefore turn out to be useful, because they are rich in concrete examples of invention in shifting fields.

Following my early books, I first had the chance to work with visual artists (Naby Avcioglu and Valérie Kempeeners) on installations, videopoems and posters. More recently, I have also collaborated with stage artists: musicians (Olivier Lamarche, Jean-Michel Espitalier), choreographers (David Wampach) and directors (Cyril Teste, Antoine Oppenheim and Sophie Cattani). Both of these types of collaboration developed over stage performances and in the form of hybrid works (posters, CD-books, DVD, installations). As for influences, they are numerous, from Jeff Walls or Jia Zhang-Ke to Doug Aitken or Hu Fang, to mention but a few very recent works.

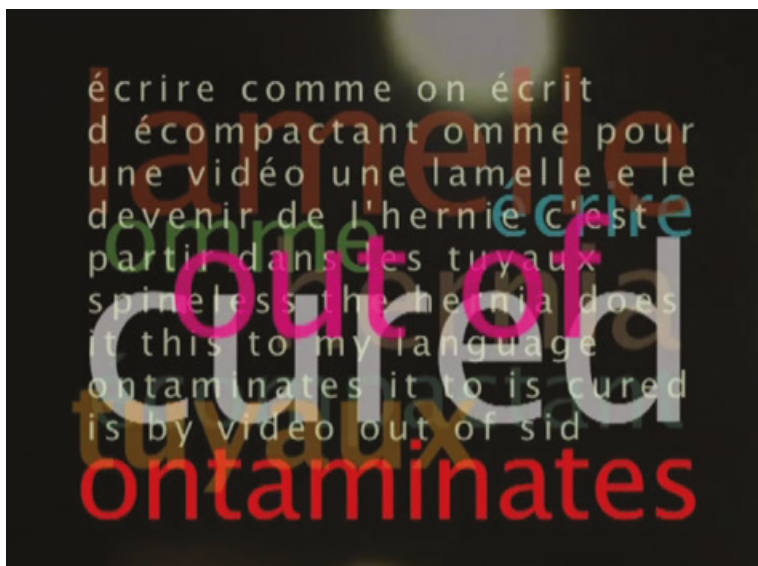


Figure 15.1. Jérôme Game, *Ceci n'est pas une légende ipe pe ce*, DVD of ten videopoems, Incidence (2007).

Writing and Art

EB: What relationship does your writing have with the other arts? In your opinion, how can the arts enrich your writing and literature more generally? If you had to define the way in which other arts inspire your writing, would you say that the inspiration comes to you from the artist him or herself (his or her artistic project/his or her biography), from the themes which interest the artist, or from what the medium itself offers in terms of possibilities for innovation in literary writing? Do you favour any of the arts in particular, and why?

JG: I believe that my writing has a twofold relationship with the arts, which makes me think of a sort of pump or permeable membrane, a strange sort of two-stroke engine. On the one hand, it is a matter of working with these art forms, in their field even, for example, by creating the hybrid forms that I mentioned in my previous response, where photographs, films and

music can be found in relation with my texts. Or perhaps by going to the usual places where these practices take place, to participate as a writer: a concert or performance hall, a cinema, a gallery or else a school. The relationship I have with art is then expressed in a totally new form, both unlike what is usually expected of literature while also contributing to the field nonetheless, by other means, from the interstices, in a number of different ways: a performance with video, sound and reading or maybe an installation combining elements which are visual and textual, visible and readable.

And then there is a second way of being in relation with the arts, and this time the relation occurs in the field of literature in the more usual sense of the term: on the page, in the text, through the way in which words are arranged. Here it is a matter of bringing methods and procedures used in art into the literary project in the strictest sense, that is into the syntax, the grammar of the language in which I write, and making them perform there without using a CD, a microphone or a screen. There are only pages and words, all informed by the ways in which the other arts work and invent. Directing this interplay of different elements we might see, for example, the use of video as surface art, cinematography as the art of framing, sequence shot or voice-off, painting as the art of touch/vibration, installation as the art of populating. As a writer, I have scrupulously observed these practices and also played them out in my imagination, and in return they have taught me to catch my breath before the page and compose a new sentence, a paragraph, a narrative which is all the more literary for having been schooled elsewhere: the museum, the workshop, the street.

In the first case, that of working with art in hybrid forms, which I sometimes call an extro-jected relationship between art and literature, I work in concrete terms on the body of the art: a screen, a speaker, a stage, things on a wall or on the ground, images, volume are all directly and physically at work with my text. I appropriate them as a writer in the sentence-image that I am composing, to use the expression coined by Jacques Rancière. In the second case, that of the text alone in which an intro-jected relation is played out, I manipulate the work just as tangibly as in the first case, but this time in terms of pure signs: they are the problems (and the solutions) of writing that it has managed to invent. And in this second case, what I am trying to produce is a Third Body, which is simultaneously virtual and concrete: a text.

La ville est bleue. On est en hauteur. Le ciel via la baie mange toute la ville est baignée de soleil. C'est midi. Sa chambre au trentième étage creuse la ville en contrebas est inondée de lumière. Les yeux fermés, il fond sur le lit défait, crame son temps. On entend le ronron de l'air conditionné. Longuement, il se vide et la lumière le brûle. Tout l'étage semble désert.

Arrivée...

[Bon, mais alors, voyons...

II
PAUSE

Benjamin prend beaucoup l'avion on dirait. Il semble y être habitué. Ça doit être pour le travail. Mais que sait-on de sa profession au juste ? Assez peu de choses en réalité. Il paraîtrait que ce soit dans la grande distribution et son expansion à l'international, "au rythme de la globalisation". Il aurait donné toute satisfaction jusqu'à présent,

[20]

bien progressé, grimpé plusieurs échelons. Et de son background personnel, que peut-on dire ? Pas beaucoup plus au fond, rien qui soit perceptible à l'œil nu dans un terminal d'aéroport le matin en tout cas. Même si ces derniers temps, il aurait donné des signes de légères absences. Soucis ? Désintérêt ? On ne peut pas le savoir de là où on se trouve. Une imperceptible distance alors, qui s'insinuerait entre lui et ce qu'il fait, sans qu'il en soit forcément conscient d'ailleurs, et qui le rendrait plus contemplatif qu'à l'ordinaire ? Peut-être, à l'observer comme ça, c'est possible. Mais poursuivons, nous verrons bien.

III
PLAY

... Arrivée.

[21]

Figure 15.2. Jérôme Game, *Salle d'embarquement*, novel, L'Attente (2017), 20–21.

This is exactly where I believe we can find the source of enrichment that the arts can bring to literature: at the level of the method itself, the level of doing, the way of working. This is where the arts teach us and force us to take a different approach to what we were already doing. This is where they raise formal and sometimes also more historic questions (of the type: 'Damn, what will become of literature now that we have smart-phones etc.'), which force us to become, to invent.

What interests me is the way in which the work of art poses problems, formulates them, while resolving them: in other words, the method of the artist (which we could also call their art). And I believe that the themes are captured therein: they do not interest me independently of the way in which they inform the work involved in the art or are redefined by it. Warhol is a useful example here: pop art is not so much a theme as machinery (cultural, industrial, social) taken up in an artistic work, that is in a way of thinking, a style which reconstructs things. The same goes for literary innovations that a medium claims to offer in and of itself, as though they belong to that field alone: I am not sure I believe that is possible. Innovations are

produced by problems; they are never offered up just like that, neither by a medium, nor by inspiration, nor by whatever else might come under the mantra 'history-of-technology-got-to-move-with-the-times'.

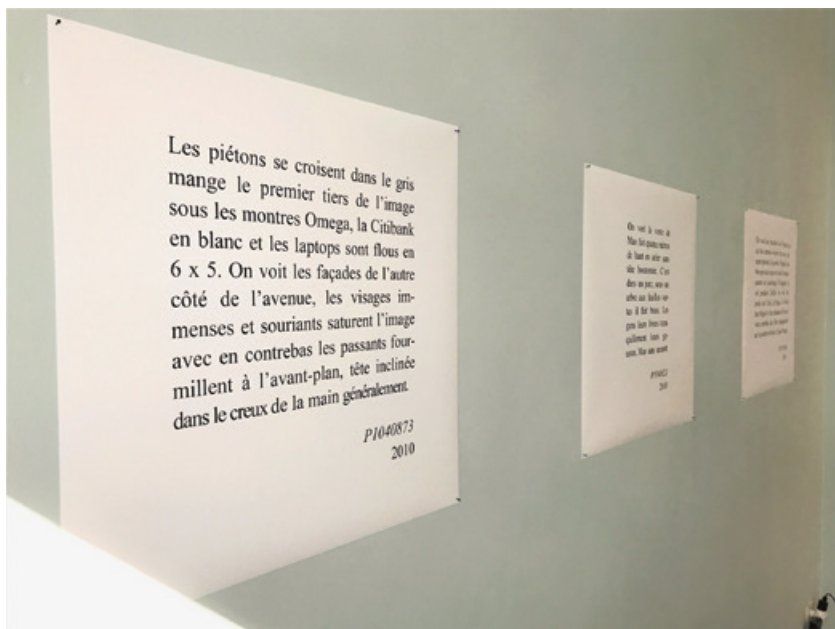


Figure 15.3. Jérôme Game, *Frontières/Borders*, series of photopoems (text print on photographic paper, 60 x 60 cm), Galery Anima Ludens, Brussels (curators: François de Coninck, Alessandro De Francesco, Gregory Lang) (2017).

Cinema, painting, photography and video art are the arts that have, I believe, influenced me the most as a writer up until now. What they share, and what makes them so dear to me, is a two-fold problem: that of framing on the one hand (that is, the issue of limits – of an action, a body, an utterance – and their porosity, the compositions that they make possible), and that of surface on the other hand (vibration, intensity, pure difference or movement within a form). I believe that their influence is so significant for me because the art of tension that is peculiar to them – between asserting and linking – effectively reformulates the questions that I ask myself in my literary work – between saying and telling, between statement and narrative.

Whether it is in terms of pixels, touch, depth of field, sequence shot or film editing, these formal questions rephrase the issue that I am dealing with in literature, they make it visible, audible. I will add, because I would not want to be taken for a formalist in the weaker sense of the word, that the questions I am talking about here, the issues that I put forward to be tackled in my work, are to my mind precisely those that are best placed to deal with the fundamental problems: those of themes, subjects, angles or anything else along those lines. I am deeply Godardian from this point of view (you could also probably say Flaubertian, maybe Manetian): it is the way of looking at something, the manner and the method which reveal or express the density or relevance of the issue, which is itself indivisible (although a problem cannot be dissected, it can be reformulated, and the substance, the accuracy or the historic importance of each formulation is to be judged *ex post*).

More recently, I have also become interested in visual and sound installation, and the ways it encompasses a world like a force field rather than like a mere colour print whose first aim is to signify (sociologically, sentimentally, formally, etc.). By spatialising various images, objects and sounds, the system of the installation attracts me with its capacity to serve as a mental editing studio where we can (re)process what our senses give us today. And of course, in turn, this is a model for a future book. The idea is not to constantly go back and forth between literature and plastic practices, claiming to know how to do it all! On the contrary, it is a case of concentrating on what you are doing as a writer via a plurality, a porosity of sensations, and finding writing mechanisms or tools where you can and appropriating them, adapting them to your literary aims; bricolage, pursuing literature itself by other means.

The Place and Role of the Subject in the Relations between Literature and Art

EB : In this context, how do you see the relationship between the subject and art (subject as narrator, subject as character, autobiographical

subject, subject-reader, etc.)? Do you think that intermediality between literature and the other arts affects our representations of the subject and the real and if so, in which way?

JG: Maybe we should ask the question the other way round. Maybe it is because our sensorium is already affected in our lives by what you call intermediality that literature lays hold of it or finds itself influenced by it. According to this hypothesis, literature is then caught up in movements that exceed it, movements transverse to all sorts of expressive practices, with all sorts of technologies potentially at stake. And in turn, literature participates in that which modifies our representations of the real in the broadest sense, in the sense of our perceptual and sensory systems. I believe that literature today can be a seismograph of perceptual shocks, which most often take place elsewhere, in the fields of sight, sound or touch, in the bodily domain generally (and which are of course likely to have a collective or political impact). Registering these impacts, literature thus develops a renewed and unpredictable power for itself out of them, by reformulating them in a code – the code of language brought to the boil in the form of what we call literature – which can then stimulate those who gain possession of it. What I mean is that literature is a metabolising machine: it captures, transforms, rephrases, rearranges and thus it enables. It enables all sorts of things. What literature can reflect back to what you call the real has, I believe, something to do with that: a way of forming a syntax, (re)composing, holding everything together (which is one definition of politics itself). It is as though through writing we shape groups or sets which are more or less open, more or less closed, which pass their time linking things, bodies between them and then unlinking them, and then tying them back together, differently. Deleuze speaks about this in regard to a stylistic device which jumps in this way from one art to another, from literature to cinema, for example, and vice versa: *style indirect libre*, or free indirect discourse as that which shatters the hermeticism of subject positions and the world positions (policing positions) that go with them in favour of a more or less generalised porosity where things morph. I think he speaks about it in relation to Rossellini from Flaubert, or something like that. I believe Marguerite Duras would also be a great example.

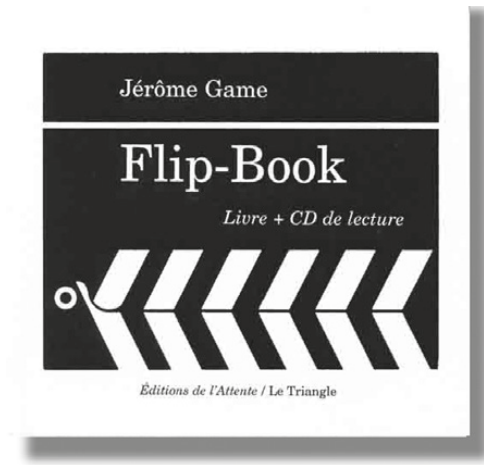


Figure 15.4. Jérôme Game, *Flip-Book* (book and CD), poems, L'Attente (2007).

The Place and Role of the Reader

EB: Has the place that you give to another art in your writing got anything to do with the place that you attribute to the reader? If so, how? Do you find that there is a readership out there which is open to these questions or these ideas? Does the involvement of other arts in your writing also include a particular concern for the reader?

JG: Yes, from what I can ascertain from encounters with readers, they are aware of the presence of these issues in my texts and are sensitive to these questions of translating or reformulating plastic processes in literature. From what readers have sometimes said to me, this is either through the pleasure taken in recognising these processes, or through their interest in the strange or unexpected effects the processes give rise to in their experience of the text.