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- 1 With the term “visual literature”, I would like to try and name, which is to say bring together and above all map a whole field of literary works which are especially moving and intrinsically unstable. This field appears in particular at the boundary between the visual arts and literature; but it also has to do with film, video and the Internet—more broadly, the *screen*, and even the *media*—, and then music and dance—otherwise put, the *stage*. In the hustle and bustle which hallmarks present-day interactions between the field of art and that of literature (which it is the brief of this issue of *Critique d’art* to attest to), it seems important to get beyond the traditional hesitancy that typifies them, by proposing a terminology more capable of *drawing* and *designing* this literary landscape, while at the same time describing its present moment. It is true that this moving, multiple relation, which is at once organic and heterogeneous, between letters and arts already has a lengthy history—and the question is raised as to knowing quite how the present period might represent a separate chapter, or is just a flimsy continuity of the historical avant-gardes. Other people are also trying their hand at this nomination: the academic Magali Nachtergaele proposes the term “neo-literature” to describe all those texts to be read and seen, gravitating around the visual and performance arts, while Pascal Mougin explores the idea of literature as “contemporary art”.¹
- 2 The need to map this literary landscape, which is a field wide open to other areas of creative work, stems from an unfortunate awareness, which has witnessed the Lettrist movement, Sound Poetry and Spatialism forever remaining on the sidelines of “instituted” literature, which those at once artistic and literary avant-gardes were endlessly attacking on account of their established conventions and principles. In an article about the poetry of the avant-gardes,² the academic Gaëlle Théval reminds us of the proliferation of *epithets latching on to the word “poetry”* in the “experimental” forms of literature of the 1960s: poetry was thus “described turn by turn as *sound, sonic, visual, action, direct, elementary, scholarly, total, spoken, performance*”, and so on. And concludes

that “these epithets, it is true, have contributed to marginalizing these forms”. To be sure, from now on this is not the time for groups, but for individual approaches. The context is no longer that of a head-on opposition to instituted, bookish literature, or to “prone” literature, as put forward by Bernard Heidsieck in the name of “standing/upright poetry”. So it is up to art criticism and literary criticism—the two are intrinsically linked here—to examine in different ways the borderline, uncertain, de-specified and multimedia landscape which is that of the most “contemporary” literature.

- 3 There is, however, another reason for the quest for a “country name” for this literary work that lies between arts and literature. We are currently witnessing nothing less than a reconfiguration of the literary system, and of literary life. The decline of the book economy, the end of its hegemony in the training of minds and the *élite* (these days more financial than literary) and, even more generally, the toppling of a civilization of the written word into the media-sphere, to use the rather apt term introduced by Régis Debray, end up seeing an increase of other forms of literary works and “publications”. The writer is being endlessly invited to accompany his book on-screen, in the social networks, at public readings, and in meetings, with readings. This “exposed condition” of the contemporary writer leads to two powerful observations: on the one hand, what was just marginalized activities in the artistic avant-gardes has now broadened, and even *massified* in the current change of civilization. What is more, it does not affect just poetry, but very markedly concerns the novel, “the novel empire”, as I like to call it (French *roman* being very close to *romain*, meaning Roman).
- 4 Paradoxically, the margin has thus finally reached the centre of instituted literature, itself obliged to get away from the book and occupy other places, like the Maison de la Poésie in Paris, which has today successfully become a “literary scene”. So the forms of “oral publications”, to borrow the words of the poet Michèle Métail, which concerned just a handful of poets and readers in the 1960s, have become the common currency of the most conventional literature.
- 5 The whole ecosystem of literature is in the throes of being altered, with a re-balancing of bookish works and “extra-bookish” practices, the realm beyond books—the *hors-livre*—having become a not inconsiderable share of authors’ activities (and remuneration).³ In this landscape, the MA degrees in literary creation at the Le Havre art school and the La Cambre art school in Brussels, and at the universities of Aix-Marseille, Toulouse and Paris 8 are open laboratories for a literature in the offing, whose aim is not just bookish publications. In these places writers and visual artists cross paths, swapping their activities, veering at times towards books, performances and the screen in a primary indeterminacy of textual production. This reconfiguration of the literary system—where the historical and contemporary input of the visual arts comes across as decisive—is such that professor Dominique Viart, a pionner in the introduction of literature into French universities, has recently proposed re-defining the literature of the contemporary extreme using an arresting term for the field of art criticism: present-day literature, in his eyes, has become “relational”.⁴ Clearly borrowed from Nicolas Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics”, this term conjures up the fact that current literature sees itself as more transitive, marked by a strong relation to the world, to reality, to history, and to the subject. It negotiates with its readers a new relation which is no longer restricted just to books, and also involves the live encounter.

- 6 So this “visual literature”, as I am trying to call it, is not a new literary “continent”. In its baggage it already has a whole history and a whole corpus. Unlike a territory or a genre, it is better looked at like an open zone, where the textual and visual dimensions of Literature intermingle, written and sonic, bookish and spatial. A vast archipelago, therefore, made up of texts, sound readings, visual graphics, imaginary writings, and walls and paintings covered with words. An incredible library, not only made up of books, but also of canvases, walls, performances, texts recited on stage, and subtitled films. Visual literature is not an ignored domain. On the contrary, it is right now the object of a tremendous exploration in the academic world. On the other hand, it has been too long divided, arbitrarily separated by frontier powerfully constructed between an inside and an outside of Literature. Conversely, it has been smithereened, as I just said, scattered in a myriad forms, instantly marginalized, and even rejected outside the literary field: visual, sound, spatial and concrete poetry, poetic performances, calligrammes, logogrammes, video-poems, photo-texts, photo novels, graphic novels, instructions, statements, gigantexts, textual arrangements, and so on. In this editorial, I would like to suggest a reunified vision of this landscape, be it divided and fragmented, where an open conception of the very idea of literature is being played out, one renewed and broadened.
- 7 What is visual literature? At first glance, it is all those texts, all those words which are there to be read, seen and heard in the field of the plastic arts. A literature that does not necessarily have the book in its sights as the terminus of literary creation. A literature that spreads over the walls of an exhibition, over painters’ canvases, which captions photographs or rings out in the space of a sound work. Texts proffered, exhibited, drawn, and performed. “Writings”, therefore, and even “shifted writings”, to borrow the title given by the curator Aziyadé Baudouin-Talec to her programme of poetic performances: herein lies the idea that writing shifts and moves in all directions and all places, and detaches itself from its place of primary identification (literature) and from its traditional medium (the book) to occupy other spaces (the wall, the stage, sound, screens, bodies), in order to increase (whence the plural) as a quantity of forms of being. We understand here, above all, that writing is being fully asserted as a praxis, an activity just like other art disciplines such as dance and music. At first glance, it is thus a literature that has come from without, and perhaps even a secondary literature, because it has very little regard from the literary world, which regularly tends to toss to its edges and margins whole swathes of texts and writings which no longer fit into a certain canon.
- 8 The fact is that we should not reduce this “visual literature” just to the sphere of art. This would tantamount to forgetting that there is also a “visual dimension” of literature: emerging from within the literary field, but being written on contact with art, drawing inspiration from the systems and arrangements of art, and borrowing the writing stratagems of artists’ works. A literature of the inside, of the within, whose writing principles come another field. I might mention various eloquent examples just in French literature: Valérie Mréjen, Edouard Levé, Thomas Clerc, Olivia Rosenthal, Théo Casciani, Jérôme Game, Nathalie Quintane, Pierre Alféri, Patrick Bouvet, François Bon, Christophe Fiat, and Sandra Moussempès. These authors emphasize the “textual arrangement”, the conceptual approach, the performative and even *in situ* dimension of writing,⁵ and the relation to screens... For a long time, already, some visual experiments in literature have fully found their place in “instituted” literature, in its history, and

even in its school textbooks. Let us think quite simply of Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*. What was certainly involved in them was reconciling text and drawing, graphics and graphic design, and writing visual poems which could be read at a single glance, just like one looks at a picture. Even if they achieve the simplicity of children's drawings, the *Calligrammes* are nothing if not texts, where the boundary between literature and its outside, here incarnated by the visual arts, blurs. Let us even push this thinking about the *Calligrammes* to its paroxysm: if, the way people sometimes talk about "the infancy of art", there is an "infancy of literature", which Apollinaire tried to go back to, it would be that moment when drawing and writing are not yet separated, not yet territorialized and disciplined; it would be those landscape-pages where words and drawings are muddled. A literature with neither outside nor inside, with no wall separating graphic and graphics. Like others before and after me, it is in this place that I inhabit literature.

- 9 Visual literature thus describes a wider space than what was called the "literature of art" or "art literature" in the early 20th century. In 1889, the English writer Oscar Wilde came up with the portmanteau term "art-literature" to describe writings about art stemming from a creative approach, as opposed to the ideas of art historians, and to shed an overly narrow conception of art criticism.⁶ This "form of literature", as Oscar Wilde called it, would be variously translated into French by the terms "literature of art" and "artist literature", and would accordingly generally describe "literary writings on art". If this "literature of art" was practiced in both fields, literary and artistic, if it adopted very diverse forms (poems, chronicles and reports, novels, and *ekphrasis*...) and if it did not confine itself to any particular genre, its common point was not formal, but had to do with its object: these were writings on and about art. Produced by both literary and artistic fields, might this "literature of art" not henceforth seem to us like an equivalent, or a possible ancestor of "visual literature"? In reality, the body of texts described by this term seems far too limited and simplistic: "visual literature" is far from limiting itself just to texts written about art, it develops within a broader framework, and has to do just as much with literary productions which, without having art as their subject, may borrow their forms and systems from the sphere of the visual arts. If the truth be told, visual literature will often have to do with texts, authors and, of both genders which write "with" art, with art as a model, and not as a subject. And there is another point here: the idea of "visual literature" owes a great deal to essay by the art critic and theoretician Dominique Baqué about "visual photography". In this essential book, the author shows how, in the late 1960s, a whole photographic output produced not by professional photographers and reporters, but by visual artists (the American painter Ed Ruscha, the French artists Christian Boltanski and Annette Messager, then later on Sophie Calle, Jeff Wall, and Jean-Marc Bustamante) would upset the landscape of the arts. Paradoxically, it was through these photographs taken by artists on the sidelines of the world of photography, and it was through this "visual photography" that was often conceptual and serial, that photography would find its way into museums and art galleries and earn an artistic recognition which had been refused it since the mid-19th century. At the same time as it promoted an art history put back together again by photography, Dominique Baqué's essay cleverly brought together a hitherto overly disparate photographic landscape, and enabled it to exist under the unified banner of "visual photography"—which some artists and photographers, such as Raymond Depardon, immediately did their utmost to dismantle. And that was fair enough.

- 10 Without being the “literary” copy of visual photography as Dominique Baqué has managed to conceptualize, let me extrapolate at least one stirring hypothesis: and if, as for photography, literature had started to change paradigms but rubbing up against media other than the book? And if, more than through film, more than through the visual and acoustic dimensions taken on by poetry in the 1960s, it was through the inclusion of this minor art of photography⁷ that literature had found itself combined in different ways with the field of the visual arts, thus giving rise to a “visual turning-point” in literature which has become ever more intense? Because, in the meantime, literary creation has broadened further to other media: to film, to video, to performance, to installation art and even to the art of the exhibition. So this is no longer the time of the special relation between poetry and painting, “poeting and paintry”, that pair of sister arts that, for centuries, had dominated the relation between literature and the other arts. Since then, other media, ranging from the most modern to the most contemporary, have been invited to the arts ball. By virtue of this broadening of the activities mixed with the art of writing, the notion of “visual literature” now assumes its full meaning and its whole scope. With, in the guise of a conclusion, the hunch that it is presenting the face of the literature to come, of the “literature of afterwards”, that of a world that will be resolutely post-literary.

NOTES

1. Mougin, Pascal. *Moderne/Contemporain : art et littérature des années 1960 à nos jours*, Dijon : Les presses du réel, 2019
2. Théval, Gaëlle. “Poésie : (Action / Directe / Élémentaire / Totale)”, *Performances poétiques*, Nantes : Cécile Default, 2017, p. 41-63. Edited by Jérôme Cabot
3. On this subject, see the two essential issues of the review *Littérature* devoted to literature beyond the book : “La Littérature exposée : les écritures contemporaines hors du livre”, n° 160, 2010/4, and “La Littérature exposée 2”, n° 192, 2018/4, Paris : Armand Colin.
4. Viart, Dominique, “Comment nommer la littérature contemporaine ?”, a text put on line in the *Atelier de théorie littéraire* of Fabula.org, Dossiers “Contemporain”, December 2019
5. Cf. Colard, Jean-Max. “Écritures in situ”, *Cahier de L’Herne : spécial Perec*, no. 116, 2016, p. 154-160
6. On this subject: *La “Littérature d’art” : entre critique et création*, Université Lille 3, 2010, (Travaux & Recherches). Edited by Joëlle Prunnaud.
7. *Photolittérature* (14 October-30 December 2016), Montricher: Fondation Jan Michalski – Pour l’écriture et la littérature, 2020. Edited by Marta Caraion, Jean-Pierre Montier

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AUTHORS

JEAN-MAX COLARD

The art critic and exhibition curator **Jean-Max Colard** is currently running the Service de la Parole—the Word Department—at the Centre Pompidou. An alumnus of the Ecole Normale Supérieure, an *agrégé* in Modern Letters, and a lecturer qualified to supervise research, he has taught French literature at Lille University for many years, and has always been deeply interested in the overlaps between literature and arts, as well as the issue of the “literary exhibition”. In this spirit, let us mention the exhibition *Duras Song, portrait d’une écriture* at the Centre Pompidou in 2014, the creation in 2017 of the festival of living literature called *Extra!*, also at the Centre Pompidou, and his monographic essay on the novel *Cinéma* by Tanguy Viel (*Une Littérature d’après*, Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2015). He has also published a collection of “critical dreams”: *L’Exposition de mes rêves* (Geneva: MAMCO, 2013).