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Literature and other arts in Canada : some current practices

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Literature and Other Arts in Canada: Some Current Practices

ABSTRACT: Even a cursory examination of some current practices in literature and other arts in Canada reveals that we live in a time of cross-pollination between the arts. It is not an accident that we have reached this moment. The cultural shift has been brought about by the influence of pop culture, technology in the arts and media, and computers. The practices also translate a desire to collaborate, to pool creative energy, to break out of the mold of the solitary suffering artist. Art experienced as a collective creative process has different goals from individual artistic pursuits. Communication and exchange constitute a journey towards becoming whole. I will briefly discuss modes of inspiration that generate interaction, Margaret Atwood's exemplary history of film and stage adaptation, with a focus on *The Penelopiad*, some other examples of collaboration between writers and other artists, and multi-disciplinary artists.

KEY WORDS: Literature, inspiration, adaptation, collaboration, multi-disciplinary artists.

Even a cursory examination of some current practices in literature and other arts in Canada reveals that we live in a time of cross-pollination between the arts. It is not an accident that we have reached this moment. The cultural shift has been brought about by the influence of pop culture, technology in the arts and media, and computers. The practices also translate a desire to collaborate, to pool creative energy, to break out of the mold of the solitary suffering artist. Art experienced as a collective creative process has different goals from individual artistic pursuits. Communication and exchange constitute a journey towards becoming whole.

Two cultural magazines have been fostering interaction between the arts for almost three decades, *Border Crossings* in Western Canada and *Spirale* in Quebec. Each has developed its own discourse, imagery and editorial practice to place the literary, other arts and critical cultural think-

ing on the same page. *Border Crossings*, a quarterly cultural magazine published in Winnipeg since 1980, currently edited by Meeka Walsh and still backed by founder and senior contributing editor, Robert Enright, humbly describes its content as “Words and Pictures.” “Its subject is contemporary Canadian and international art and culture, which the magazine investigates through articles, columns, reviews, profiles, interviews and portfolios of drawings and photographs.”¹ “*Border Crossings* crosses both disciplinary and geographic boundaries in its coverage of the visual, performing and the literary arts. The magazine’s interest is in the edges where new art is produced. Exploring the boundaries of culture with intelligence, wit and style, the magazine covers all areas of contemporary art. *Border Crossings* takes its readers in the freshest directions: from painting to performance, from architecture to sculpture, from dance and theatre to video and film.” *Spirale*, a bi-monthly published in Montreal since 1979, currently edited by Patrick Poirier, “critically and passionately examines recent cultural productions (visual arts, cinema, history, music, philosophy, psychoanalysis, theatre, etc.) and presents, in each issue, a thematic feature as well as portfolios of visual artists from Canada and abroad. An interdisciplinary magazine, *Spirale* demands and contributes to the development of true critical reflection and regularly proposes debates on contemporary issues.”² “With a firm grasp of contemporary culture, *Spirale* is one of the rare magazines that wants to be a laboratory of ideas and writing.” “The strength and originality of *Spirale* have been recognized as a result of its critical mission, its philosophical spirit, its literary quality, its way of humanizing history and its passion for art and creation.” Both magazines generously integrate visual art, allowing readers to make their own connections between seemingly randomly matched images and articles, book reviews and interviews. For the visual reader, the magazines offer a fertile cultural exchange.

Border Crossings and *Spirale* are on the cutting edge of the cultural studies movement that is leading the study of literature back out into the wider world in which it is produced. The slow but steady rise of the cultural approach to literary analysis in universities has loosened the grip of the rigorous but strictly text-based linguistic methods of the sixties and seventies, founded on Russian formalism and French structuralism and narratology.

Since the emergence of the cinema and television, writers have been flattered to have their books adapted to both the big and small screens in order to reach a broader audience and for the pleasure and honour of

¹ Website for *Border Crossings*.

² My translation of their brochure.

having their work recognized by these powerful media, as well as the possibility of considerable financial rewards. Screening the written has been a driving force in motivating writers to collaborate with other artists: screenwriters, film directors, musicians and actors.

Interaction between the arts, as stimulating as it might be for the artists involved, does pose certain risks for the production and the consumption of art. If art tends to take art as its subject matter or inspiration, either in the form of a poem about a painting, or a film or play about a novel, or an opera about a verse-play, does the resulting art become more rarified and removed from the lived experience that was at the origin of the original? Are we moving into art for art's sake as the sole justification of art? Are we advocating living solely to make better art as opposed to making art to help us live better? If so, we would be reverting to the almost religious principles of aesthetic purity of the early modernists like Mallarmé and Valéry, Eliot and Pound. On the other hand, according to French new novelist Michel Butor, literature is always about literature; the themes, characters and plots are already and inescapably there for the writer and just require expression in the idiom of the day; nothing essentially new can be invented. Maybe it is in rebellion against this predetermined straightjacket that writers are stepping outside the conventional confines of literature and into hybrid collaborative creations.

I will briefly discuss modes of inspiration that generate interaction, Margaret Atwood's exemplary history of film and stage adaptation, with a focus on *The Penelopiad*, some other examples of collaboration between writers and other artists, and multi-disciplinary artists.

Inspiration

Inspiration most commonly spurs relations between the arts. The classic example in the Canadian corpus is Margaret Atwood's short story "Death by Landscape," inspired by landscapes by the Group of Seven. However, today many poets and prose writers respond to particular works of art — Canadian and international — in their writing.

One such writer is Liliane Welch, author of over twenty collections of poetry and four books of literary criticism and essays. Born in industrial pre-WWII Luxembourg in 1937, Welch fled the old traditions of Europe to study American and French literature in American universities and from 1967 taught French literature at Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B., where she still makes her home. Her major poetic influences are the

French Romantic and early modern poets. She both brings a European sensibility to her writing about Maritime landscape and culture and opens European culture up through a Maritime lens. English retains a kind of otherness for her, even though she has extensively published in the language, which may explain why her poetry is driven by imagery and ideas, more than by sound and rhythm. Like her mentors, Welch is a self-reflexive poet, as interested in the process as in the product. Welch has always brought an intense seriousness and willfulness to her art. While she describes herself as a loner, through her poetry she nonetheless privileges dialogue with other artists, either writers or visual artists. Her collaborations, which are numerous, are all imaginary. Walking down the street in Sackville, Welch is perfectly capable of having a Baudelaire moment.³ In the following poem, a painting by Maritime artist Alex Colville inspires Welch to develop the fidelity between an artist and his dog as an analogy of the relationship between the artist and his art.

Fidelity: Colville's "Dog and Groom"

He kneels intently on the red tiles smoothing
 the bright pelt, as he does every morning
 before the fireplace. His bond grows deeper
 with each stroke. He recalls
 when the golden dog came into his life.
 The house had been silent for months.
 She followed him, and now she stands tranced;
 incarnate of every dog. Her face locks us into
 her eyes. Two liquid brown stones are
 the faint cello sound of the heart. His hand loses
 itself in the fur. Animals bear no malice,
 but an innocence promised, a fidelity forever
 renewed. It is raining when he stops grooming,
 the windows alive with light drumming.
 This afternoon he will be in his studio, claimed
 by the dog's presence. Painting the glad silence
 inching from the paws into his hands.

WELCH, L., 1997: 64

In an interview with Jeanette LYNES a couple of years later, Welch expands on why the notion of "fidelity" is important to her:

³ The way Baudelaire spotted a passing / mysterious mourner draw close her grief, [...] So I met her sister / Friday night on Sackville's four-way corner, "Girl Passing in Sackville", *Fidelities*, Liliane Welch, Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1997, p. 33.

What I meant was being loyal to three things: landscape, other artists, and home. I was very struck when I saw that [Colville] painting: the gestures of the man, the way the animal stands here, completely taking up the space. The man is only there because of the animal. I think that painting is a symbol of Colville's life; he is a man who is completely there for his art. He is the servant of art. He would never let himself get distracted from his art. There's an extraordinary fidelity in the way Alex Colville lives his life.

1999: 114

Welch uses what she perceives to be affinity between Colville's commitment to art and her own to articulate her philosophy of art with its echoes of the aesthetic purity of the early modernists. Welch does not, however, blindly emulate the often wretched lives of the poets she so admires. She never went off to sell slaves in Abyssinia or became addicted to absinthe. Her personal doctrine of "cleanliness" and engagement with high-risk mountain climbing recall the obstinate idealism of Ayn Rand more than the dark Parisian nightlife of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Welch would say that she is interested in the poetry of the poets, and not their lives, and yet she clearly organizes her own life around the enormous place art — theirs and hers — occupies in it. She has built an honour code around this system that keeps doubt at bay.

Literary texts also inspire works of visual art through some type of reference such as a quotation. Audrey Feltham's *Behold I Stand at the Door and Knock* (2006),⁴ a multi-media editioned print, features a quotation from "Sunday Morning" by Wallace Stevens. A quotation from Eliot in another print explicitly addresses the question of the choice of subject-matter: "We all have to choose whatever subject-matter allows us the most powerful and most secret release; and that is a personal affair." According to Tom Lovatt, the curator of the exhibition:

"Audrey Feltham is unusual in her use of poetry to guide her connection to an emotional landscape whose contours are indeterminable, shifting, and rearranging themselves according to the associations each reading provokes. The texts are taken from a number of modern poets — Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot, for example. Feltham uses excerpts of poetry as a kind of loadstone, a point at which a field of images begin to cluster like iron filings around a magnet, each one oriented toward the text allusively and drawing behind it a string of associations, feelings, thoughts, and other images. This layering of image and text sets up a series of contin-

⁴ *Behold I Stand at the Door and Knock* was included in the 2007 Marion McCain Atlantic Art Exhibition, *Site/Specific/Sight*, held at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, N.B. in autumn 2007.

gencies in which the meaning of one image, idea, or association is continually altered by exposure to others. Within this field of multiple interpretations, Feltham addresses an idea of meaning not as fixed and specific, but general and allusive, operating on many levels at any one time.”⁵

In 2003, the late Island poet and 21-year editor of *Arts Atlantic*, Joseph Sherman began to curate a formal exchange between poets and paintings called *Writing on the Wall* at the Confederation Centre of the Arts Gallery in Charlottetown, P.E.I. The poet chose a painting from the Gallery’s permanent collection and wrote a poem in response. The paintings and resulting poems in “If the Sea, If the Mind” were exhibited side-by-side on a wall. Island poets who have participated include Richard Lemm, Lesley-Anne Bourne, Brenton MacLaine and Hugh MacDonald. In 2004, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, N.B. adopted this modality for exchange, but in a bilingual version. The poem was translated into French or English, either by the poet or an established literary translator, and the translation was also displayed. Each poem is also the subject of a bilingual monograph in which the curator discusses how the poet chose his or her painting and the process of writing the poem. Poets who have participated in New Brunswick include Ross Leckie, Anne Compton and Rose Després. Nancy Bauer is curating *Writing ON the Wall* in 2008 and has issued an invitation to established New Brunswick poets.

Literature also chooses other arts and artists as its subject matter. Art becomes the observed/narrated life-story. A contemporary Canadian writer whose fictional world is crowded with artists of all sorts is Nancy Huston. From her very first novel, *Les Variations Goldberg* (Seuil 1981) in which we read about the thoughts of the members of the audience who are listening to a recital of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* in a Parisian apartment, through to her latest novel, *Fault Lines* (McArthur 2007), in which the central character, Kristina, is a singer who sings without words as a reaction to the brutal loss of her mother tongue and identity during World War II, Huston incessantly returns to the worlds of artists and the difficulties they encounter in making art. Miranda, a Native painter in *Plain-song* (Harper Collins 1993) has had her work interrupted by domestic and social constraints and obligations, and is finally prevented from painting by disease. In *Slow Emergencies* (Little, Brown 1996), Lin Lhomond must choose between her life as a choreographer and dancer and that as a wife and mother, with painful consequences for her husband and two young daughters. In *Instruments of Darkness* (Little, Brown 1997), Nadia, a divorced American writer, is writing a novel based on the real 18th century French story of Barbe Durand, said novel occupying half of Huston’s

⁵ *Site/Specific/Sight Catalogue*, The Beaverbrook Art Gallery, 2007, p. 27–28.

novel. Raphael Lepage is a celebrated French flutist in *The Mark of an Angel* (Steerforth Press 1999), but the real artist in this novel is Andrés, a Hungarian-Jewish refugee who repairs musical instruments. *Prodigy: A Novella* (McArthur 2000) tells about the early years of Maya Mestival, a child piano prodigy born to a French piano teacher.

Maybe Huston's obsession reflects her experience of life; as an adult, she has lived in the intellectual and artistic milieu of the Parisian intelligentsia, having escaped North America and English during her junior year at Sarah Lawrence College. After learning French quickly, a language from which she still maintains a distance that stimulates creation, she published several essays and novels in France. With the publication of *Plainsong* in 1993, she returned to the subject of her native province, Alberta, in her mother tongue. Since then, she has written and rewritten — she refuses to use the word “translate”, claiming for each version of her book the status of an original work of art — a dozen novels and essays in French and English, and not necessarily in that order. If it is true that we write about what we know, then we could hardly expect Huston to write about the men who work in the forest of the Miramichi like David Adams Richards. However, is there more to Huston's choice of subject than autobiographical determinism or is she implicitly arguing that artists are more interesting and significant than characters from other professions? *Journal de la création* (Actes Sud and Leméac 1990), her complex study of the mind/body split, images to express the creation of the mind and the creation of the body (pregnancy) and the relationship between life and art in several artist couples, argues that this is indeed the case for her.

Adaptation

Canadian writers have seen their work adapted to the big and small screens for decades; in fact, most of the major novels in the corpus have been made into films: Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*, Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*, David Adams Richards's *Nights Below Station Street*, L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Recently, Douglas Coupland's novel *J-Pod* was adapted to a CBC TV series, barely a year after publication.

Margaret Atwood's long history of involvement with both the big and little screens and the stage exemplifies Canlit's love affair with cinema. All her major novels and even a collection of poetry have been or are be-

ing adapted to film: *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1979), screenplay by M. Atwood and Marie Waisberg; *Surfacing* (1979), screenplay by Bernard Gordon and directed by Claude Jutra; *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), screenplay by Harold Pinter and directed by Volker Schlöndorff; *The Robber Bride* (2007), a comic thriller made for TV by CBC, screenplay by Tassie Cameron and directed by David Evans. *Alias Grace* is a movie in the making directed by Dominic Savage and reportedly starring Cate Blanchett. *The Blind Assassin* is being adapted into a four-part TV mini-series. Atwood has for the most part left the work of film adaptation of her novels to others. However, she has also written her own screenplays for other films: *The Servant Girl* (CBC movie 1974), *Snowbird* (CBC movie 1981) and *Heaven on Earth* (CBC movie 1987).

In 2004, Atwood decided to transform *The Penelopiad* into a play and herself into a playwright.⁶ The play was a historical first, co-produced by the National Arts Centre in Ottawa and the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon, UK, where it was directed by Josette Bushell-Mingo and staged by a high-powered all-female cast of thirteen. Atwood didn't write the novel with a play in mind, according to journalist Martin MORROW, but she "deliberately structured [it] as a homage to classical Greek drama" (2007). Atwood tells interviewer Jennifer MUNDAY, that

It didn't occur to [her] immediately that [she] was going to be doing [a play]. Not until [she]'d actually written it did it occur to [her] that in fact the Maids are dramatic performers. [She] wrote them as a 'take' on the Greek chorus... it was a way of casting light on this really questionable event, namely the hanging of the Maids.

www.nac-can.ca

Atwood responded to Munday's question about why theatre artists would choose novels as the source material for live staged work by talking about the form of the writing:

It's not a straight play. It's not a musical comedy or opera — the best word I could come up with was a 'cabaret'. Because it's closest in form to a Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill... in which there's talking and then there's musical numbers. But it's not like the long form that we've come to know as 'the musical'. It's more like a chamber piece — a smaller thing.

www.nac-can.ca

⁶ One of her novels had already inspired a play by someone else: Dave Carley dramatized *The Edible Woman* for the radio in 1996 and adapted it to the stage in 2000.

Munday observes other theatre artists have argued “a strong reason for choosing a story or fiction for adaptation was the eternal quality of the tale being told and the ability of an audience to identify with it.” Margaret Atwood believes these qualities are there in the *Odyssey*, and *The Penelopiad*: “It’s every scene you’ve ever seen in a movie in which a fort is besieged and the cavalry is on the way, and the people in the fort don’t know... So it’s like that — Penelope is besieged, Odysseus is on the way, but she doesn’t know it.”

It has continued appeal. It’s every wife’s story who is waiting up for her husband to come home from Los Angeles — he’s late! It’s like Cinderella — Cinderella’s probably the oldest story that we know about, and it’s been told since prehistory, and we still love it. Why? Because there’s some little Cinderella within each of us that identifies with that character. And we identify with the besieged Penelope. And we identify with Odysseus and all he’s going through, and how he gets in and out of strife. And all I’m asking in this is that we also identify with the Maids. They tend to get left out of it.

Martin Morrow situates the story within popular culture to explain its attraction: “As reconceived by Atwood, Penelope is much more than the patient paragon of wifely fidelity depicted in Homer’s *The Odyssey* — rather, think of her as an ancient Greek Desperate Housewife.”

And why did Atwood do it? “Only one reason — it’s fun! Why do we call a play ‘a play’? Why do we use the same word for a play as we do for playing the piano and children at play? So if it isn’t fun, in the broadest sense, if it isn’t engaging, there’s no point in doing it,” she explained to Munday. Atwood told Morrow “it just seemed the natural thing to do with this particular piece.” Staging *The Penelopiad* reminded Atwood of other happy theatrical experiences from her childhood: a puppet show and summer camp. “This is a bit like a puppet show, in that you have a stage and props and dialogue, and you have to get the characters on and off the stage,” Atwood commented. “‘What it’s really the most like is summer camp,’ she says. ‘Theatre is summer camp for grownups. We always put on shows at summer camp.’”

Atwood informed Munday that she did not think this project might lead her to more adaptations for the stage. “This process, she said, had been a distraction from novel writing — although not completely unwelcome.” “I’ve written a number of screenplays, and that’s a whole other process that’s different as well. And the process of making a film is very different from the process of making a piece of theatre. It’s a mosaic — and everything is done in little bits and then stuck together. Whereas for

a piece of theatre everyone has to get ‘souped’ up every evening while you go on and do this quite difficult thing.” While Atwood may not be willing to undertake another theatrical adaptation of one of her novels, she has mused about seeing *Oryx and Crake* made into an opera: “It would be easier to do as an opera because it is so peculiar and opera lends itself to very peculiar things.”

Other Collaborations

Ironically, cinematographers, too, want to collaborate beyond the conventions of the medium. The most innovative film collaborator in Canada is Guy Maddin and his latest film, *Brand Upon the Brain!*, a black and white melodrama and coming-of-age autobiography, was screened at the New Music Festival in Winnipeg in January 2008 to a live narration by Isabella Rossellini and a live performance by the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra. All who attended reported a memorable night, a summit of creative collaboration amongst high-caliber artists. For over twenty years, Maddin’s screen-writing collaborator has been George Toles, film professor at the University of Manitoba and author of *A House Made of Light: Essays on the Art of Film* (Scholarly Book Services 2002).

Literary writers writing operas these days include George Elliott Clarke, whose verse play, *Beatrice Chancy* (*Canadian Theatre Review*. 96 (Fall 1998)), became a libretto with music by James Rolfe and who more recently penned *Québécois: A Jazz Fantasia in Three Cantos* (Gaspereau 2003) and the opera *Trudeau: Long March/Shining Path* (Gaspereau 2007), set to music by D.D. Jackson. Contemporary classical music composer Glen Buhr has transformed poems by Margaret Sweatman, a Winnipeg writer, into songs: *Cathedral Songs* (1995) and *Three Songs* (1998).

An example of a book in which the texts and a variety of images (photos, drawings and paintings) are equally featured is Lise Gaboury-Diallo’s bilingual art book *Homestead, poèmes au coeur de l’Ouest* (Regina: Les éditions de la nouvelle plume 2005). The collection, which critics say has documentary value, explores the pioneer experience of Francophone settlers in Western Canada. Gaboury-Diallo’s collection won the first prize in poetry in the 2004 Radio-Canada literary awards and was originally published in *EnRoute* in 2005. Laurence Véron’s photographs, Étienne Gaboury’s drawings and Anna Binta Diallo’s paintings accompany the original French poems and Mark Stout’s English translations.

*Dykeland*s (McGill-Queens University 1989) is a model of a joint publication between a visual artist, photographer Thaddeus Holownia, and a poet, Douglas Lochhead, both from Sackville, New Brunswick. Lochhead's poetry complements Holownia's wide banquet camera photographs of the Tantramar Marsh in a book that explores "the uneasy truce between the organic and the technological."

Multi-disciplinary artists

European traditions of multi-talented artists include the courts of the Renaissance where members of the aristocracy cultivated all their physical skills, mental aptitudes and artistic talents to entertain their peers and foil their attacks. The British poet, mystic and visionary William Blake comes to mind as a writer most famous during his lifetime as an engraver. In fact, his obituary did not even mention his poetry. Influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite school, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement of the mid-nineteenth century advocated a complete aesthetic experience of life according to which all domestic products were to be of artistic or high craftsmanship quality. To a certain extent, the Bloomsbury Group emulated these principles. North American native cultures have their own traditions of multi-talented artists. The shaman is a healer, political leader, mediator, musician, storyteller and visual artist. Native arts emphasize the connectedness between the spirits and reality, animals and humans, humans and the earth. Native artists seek to connect with what they are missing.

Many writers in Canada today are also visual artists, musicians, photographers and filmmakers. They do not simply collaborate with artists in other fields, while collaboration is not excluded, but have chosen to develop their own talents in different media.

In Atlantic Canada, we have the remarkable example of Acadian artist Herménégilde Chiasson, author of many plays, such as *Le Christ est apparu au Gun Club* (Prise de parole 2005), and collections of poetry, most recently *Béatitudes* (Prise de parole 2007), maker of numerous documentaries, most notably *Toutes les photos finissent par se ressembler* (NFB 1985), the story of the Acadian literary renaissance of the seventies, and a visual artist who has had solo exhibitions at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, N.B. and at the NSCAD gallery in Halifax, N.S. Chiasson's plays tend to be political and spiritual in theme, whereas his poetry collections consist of an accumulation of lyrical fragments. His visual art includes painting, small paper sculptures and collages. Chiasson trained

in fine arts at Mount Allison University and wrote his doctoral thesis on photography at the Sorbonne. He has received numerous awards and honours. As well, in the true spirit of Montaigne, who would have preferred to have carried on writing his essays on the classics in his tower to taking up what he perceived to be his duty to don the robe of the mayor of Bordeaux, Chiasson has graciously served as Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick since 2003. His Honour has tirelessly promoted the arts and literacy, all the while continuing to write and teach.

Douglas Coupland, the best-known multi-disciplinary artist working in Canada today, also brings a fine arts background to his career as a writer, having studied sculpture at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, as well as in Japan and Italy. He subsequently studied management science in Honolulu and Tokyo. Coupland came to writing through magazines that focused on popular culture or business. With the publication of *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (St. Martin's Press 1991), Coupland brilliantly articulated the zeitgeist of his generation: their difficulties in finding meaningful and lasting work, their resentment of the baby boomers, their obsession with popular culture, their frequent recourse to irony as a solution to life's problems and the profound impact of technology, especially computers, on their lives. It was a lucid detailed portrait drawn by an eye trained to look and a hand taught to carve and it launched Coupland on a brilliant career. In his next dozen novels, Coupland has continued to coldly and shrewdly observe his middle class protagonists, capturing the uncanny aspects of the ordinary, rescuing the quotidian from the sludge of banality. While Coupland's worldview might be consistently ironic, it is not cynical; his protagonists are not resigned to the barren wastelands of their lives; however their endeavours to change are idiosyncratic and often absurd. Critics place his fiction within the transgressional school because of his graphic portrayal of taboo topics. Since *Microserfs* (Harper Collins 1995), Coupland has experimented with the material reality of the text using bold and unusual typography, including pages of what appears to be code. He sculpts the book like an art object. He also writes non-fiction primarily on Canadian icons like *Terry* (Douglas & McIntyre 2005). In 2004, he wrote a play, *September 10*, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-on-Avon. He wrote the screenplay for *Everything's Gone Green* (2006). In 2001, Coupland returned to visual art to which he brings a Pop Culture sensibility. In 2005, he explicitly began to study the relationship between literary and visual arts cultures, exposing and exploring the polymorphous meaning of pop music lyrics. Recent art shows include *Fifty Books I Have Read More Than Once* (Simon Fraser University Gallery 2007), in which each book has a wooden sculpture whose size reflects the impact the book had on Coupland the reader, and *Dream House* (Organ-

ized by Plug In ICA 2008). After having actively participated in the public domain in the construction of his very complex and diverse artist persona for a decade and a half, Coupland announced in the fall of 2007 that he would abstain from public readings and discussion of his work. Does he think his readers will allow him to actually retreat to his studio now?

An entirely new genre created by Generation X in North America that combines visual art and writing is the graphic novel. This literary long form of the comic treats social criticism, personal reflection and historic or political subject matter. Three Canadian graphic novelists are Julie Doucet, who writes in French and English (*Long Time Relationship* (Drawn & Quarterly 2001), and *Chroniques de New York* (Seuil 2003), Chester Brown, *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* (Drawn & Quarterly 2006) and Seth (J.H. Gallant), *Bannock, Beans and Black Tea* (Drawn & Quarterly 2005). The appeal of the genre is the fusion of narrative and illustration. All the components of a conventional novel have to be captured in word and image.

One of the many books featuring the writer's own art on the cover is Don Domanski's *All Our Wonder Unavenged* (Brick Books 2007), last year's winner of the Governor General's Award for poetry. Jack Pine Press first published Domanski's poem "All Our Wonder Unavenged" as a chapbook with his drawings 2006.

Regina Coupar, a Nova Scotia writer, teacher and visual artist whose present passion is feminist spirituality, founded her own publishing house, Gamaliel, to combine her poetry and visual imagery. (Echoes of Blake?) When Jeanette Lynes asks Coupar in an interview how her visual art and writing relate to one another, she replies:

They overlap. When I'm thinking about something, I have a reaction to it. The reaction might be visual. If it's visual, it might be a lithograph, or a watercolour or a drawing. I don't know which medium beforehand. I don't decide; I let it tell me. If it's written, it might be a poem, it might be prose. I try to let it tell me. That's how I think I do my best work. I might look at something today and see a picture. I might look at the same thing tomorrow and hear words I want to write.

LYNES, J., 1997: 207

In the field of spirituality, where the difficulty of changing traditional images is often insurmountable — how many people can see God as a woman? —, it is not surprising that the artist wants to create a new image and not just redescribe an old one.

Beth Powning, New Brunswick nature photographer and writer, is the author of a memoir, *Shadow Child: An Apprenticeship in Love and Loss*

(Penguin 1999) and a novel, *The Hatbox Letters* (St. Martin's Press 2005), as well as two collections of nature photographs and prose, *Seeds of Another Summer: Finding the Spirit of Home in Nature* (Penguin 1998) and *Edge Seasons* (Knopf 2005). Powning is motivated by the desire to tell the truth about human experience, including loss and suffering, and capture the minute and subtle transformations in the constantly fluctuating beauty of nature. Learning to see and showing others are at the heart of her art, both as a writer and a photographer.

Native writer Thomas King, best known for his novel *Green Grass, Running Water* (Harper Collins 1993), became a radio writer and actor with the creation of *The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour*, an irreverent and biting comedy show that ran on CBC Radio One from 1997 to 2000. The fictional café and town of Blossom, Alberta were borrowed, along with other elements, from King's novel. King played himself. The show was revived in 2006 as *Dead Dog in the City* and is currently being transformed into a TV series. In 2003, King was the first Native invited to give a Massey lecture, published as *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (House of Anansi 2005).

Two of our most established lyricists, Joni Mitchell and k.d. lang, are trained and practicing visual artists who arrive at the often elusive words of their songs through painting. The novelist Nancy Huston is a good amateur harpischordist who plays to establish a transition between the concerns of everyday life and the space in which she writes her fiction. She also uses recordings of her playing as a backdrop to her public readings of her fiction. Such will be the format of "Carte blanche à Nancy Huston" to be held at the 2008 Northrop Frye Literary Festival in Moncton, New Brunswick and during which she will read passages from *Lignes de faille* (Actes Sud and Leméac 2006) and *Fault Lines* in French and English.

The publication of *Book of Longing* (McLelland and Stewart) by Leonard Cohen in 2006 continues to receive a lot of attention from critics and other artists, not just because of Cohen's devoted readers' curiosity about his first new material published since 1984, but also because of the inclusion of drawings and paintings, mostly self-portraits and stylized anonymous female nudes, in the collection of poetry and prose. In an interview with Robert Enright, Cohen describes the images:

A number of the images in the book were details of larger works in which the colours are very rich and the blacks very black. The medium for the drawings ranges from watercolours to oil pastels, to a number of combinations of those, which are then put in Photoshop. A lot of them were drawn on a Wacom tablet with a free-standing stylus fit right into the

computer. So it really runs from doodles on napkins to watercolours, oil pastels, charcoal drawings, right up to digitally created images.

ENRIGHT, R., 2007

Cohen contends that doodles and consciously drawn images are equally as serious for him, “just as play is deadly serious for children.” He thinks drawing and his work as poet, songwriter and novelist are a relief one from the other. “I always drew and when my kids were growing up a large feature of our family activity was to sit around the kitchen table with a lot of different kinds of material and draw. That’s always been what I’ve done, especially in Greece when there seemed to be a lot of time, or when the kids were growing up in Montreal. Then I got interested in computers.” “The drawings by Leonard Cohen were included in an exhibition called *Drawn to Words: Visual works from 40 years* that premiered at the Drabinsky Gallery in Toronto on June 3, 2007.” Philip Glass composed a two-hour long composition, for a seven-piece instrumental ensemble and four singers, with himself on keyboards, entitled *Book of Longing (A Song Cycle Based on the Poetry and Images by Leonard Cohen)*. The Orange Mountain Musichas label released it in December 2007. The composition premiered at Luminato, the Toronto Festival of Arts and Creativity, June 1st, 2007, and was subsequently performed in London and Groningen.

Conclusion

Several observations can be made about the current practices in literature and other arts in Canada discussed in this essay. Firstly, pleasure is luring writers to leave the solitude of conventional writing practices to either collaborate with other artists or develop other artistic talents of their own. This pleasure is imperative and integral to the experience of creation. Both Atwood and Cohen speak about the joy and seriousness of play. The practice can also be described as following the flow of creative energy or respecting fidelities. Secondly, the enrichment of one artistic skill by another, either in collaboration or for multi-disciplinary artists, heightens the experience of art for artists, spectators and readers. The eye of the photographer or painter enhances the verbal dexterity of the writer. The ear of the musician sharpens the rhythms and sounds of the poet. The hand of the illustrator complements the art of the storyteller. Thirdly, contemporary writers in Canada are bringing diverse skills to the craft of writing as many have training in fine arts, photography, architecture, filmmaking

and music, freeing present writers from the tradition and authority of literary writing and criticism, making them less likely to heed such dictates as Roland Barthes' declaration that "The author is dead." Fourthly, the will to create is exerted in a more fluid fashion in collaborations and for multi-disciplinary artists. The artist is attuned to the possibility of several modes of expression and choosing the mode becomes part of the artistic process itself. Fifthly, the diversity of schools of writing in Canadian literature attracts interactions with a variety of other arts: nature writing is drawn to photography; postmodern writing has an affinity with pop culture, technology and computers; poetry of classical inspiration reverberates with other poetry, painting and photography. Certain genres of all the schools, from the regional to the multi-ethnic, namely novels, short stories and plays are transformed into films, TV shows and plays. The opportunities available give writers more choice in the development of their talents and their work. The ubiquity of film adaptation of literature today may have given writers the team model as an alternative to the solitary act of creation. Lastly, the experience of art as collaboration or as a multi-disciplinary artist generates a sense of wholeness that is different from that achievable in the individual and single-disciplined act of creation. A violinist playing a solo may feel complete satisfaction with her performance, just as a poet can be gratified with a particularly good poem. However, when the violinist joins the orchestra or when the poet publishes his poems with an artist's paintings, sounds, themes and images resonate and the emotions expressed expand and intensify. The experience is comparable to the difference between Dionysia and the tragic hero's monologue, or between a Native dance festival and a sculptor carving alone in a studio. Both collective and solitary creation marry the artist to the art and the dancer to the dance, but in the collective act communication and exchange become part of the journey towards a different wholeness.

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