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Artists' Books as a Means of Cross-Cultural Transfer

Abstract

The article studies the artists' books of some of the most famous writers and painters of our time, Georges Badin and Michel Butor. When they met in 1976 at their first exhibition, not knowing each other, they did not expect they would become the authors of their masterpiece *The Catalonian Garden* in 2000. Thus artists' books become a means of cross-cultural transfer in space over different periods of time. Artists' books exemplify in the best way one of the most important aspects of the relationships between arts and especially the interartistic phenomenon. Since it exists in any field of art as a semiotic structure, hereby it expresses the encounter between arts in a polyphonic and compelling way.

Keywords: interartistic phenomenon, artists' book, painting, literature, photography, theatre

To write, I listen to the images of artists.
– Michel Butor

Artists' books are a versatile form of expression that allowed Michel Butor to cross the boundaries of the arts and explore the world by reaching the universe. The same approach to painting was undertaken by Georges Badin, who began to write while painting. Their collaboration began at the medieval castle of Fougères in 1976, where Michel Butor presented artists' books and Badin was also exhibiting. Several of Badin's texts are available on his website as well as a recent publication from 2009 titled *Livre à deux voix* (Book in Two Voices), published by *Æncrages* and Co. For his part, "Butor takes an interstellar exploratory journey behind the scenes—'En coulisse'. The painter's black lines become electric cables for the poet" (Giraudou 2011). Moreover, Butor is sensitive to the musical aspect of Ba-

din's works as relationship between the voice, the glance, and the phrase is established: "This voice, you have it at your side without interrupting it, as if carrying effluvia that do not join, and every glance becomes a phrase or several" (Badin 2007: 12). At each repetition they hear a different melody and therefore the musical tone (Kolarova 2019: 115), being parallel to the change in the pictorial tone, reveals to our gaze the radiance of their interferences in symphony, as the luminous waves that surface out of the water outlines: "The painter avoids the disappearance of the river by illuminating the passage of the water between the stones with a plain blue, joining with innumerable precautions the freedom of the poem" (Badin 2007: 11). Is this the moment of creation? Badin describes "this musical passage, free of all place."

The exhibition by Butor at the National Library in Paris, 2006, intended to be in motion, was not by coincidence given the title *Michel Butor, l'écriture nomade* (Michel Butor, Nomadic Writing) because Butor always marks the course of time with the outstanding signature of his creative work in motion, which includes valuable manuscripts, books about artists, original editions, and audiovisual documents. The exhibition as a whole is like a transition, a journey through space and time. It is a range over the surface of works of art like a walk taken over the globe or a sphere, mirroring the divine gifts poured out into the field of the arts, flowing from one to another, creating an interartistic phenomenon. That is precisely what makes them inexpressible, unable to be defined in terms of the art form to which his works belong to—whether to literature, painting, or music.



Figure 1. Exhibition of Michel Butor in Paris (2006, National Library)

The interartistic phenomenon (Kolarova 1998: 27) is applicable in any work of art that concentrates several arts. This structure is common to all

the arts and unifies all the arts into a single entity; this absent structure is sought at the border between the signs and appears in every work of art. It is this element that makes the work of art exceptional. It is the abstract expanse that underpins the vast artistic field that forms its basis and is made up of interartistic energy threads. Textuality is understood as a field of intersection between the arts in a particular field of art. The borders between the arts are no longer watertight, and they fade away to a second, higher level of fusion. Thanks to the interartistic phenomenon, we can evaluate the elusiveness of a work of art, combining several arts, at least two, in dialogue, born in one time, and valid for all times, through the ages. He gives a varied palette of models through which the viewer can appreciate the work, intermusicality, interpicturality, interarchitecturality, and interphotography. Butor gives primacy to one or two arts in question, which overwhelm the interartistic palette according to inspiration. For instance, interpicturality (Kolarova 2007: 735) exists in Butor's *Mobile* (Butor 1962: 35), *Passage de Milan* (Butor 1954), and *Le Jardin catalan* (Butor & Badin 2000: 21), a joint work by Butor and Badin. The phenomenon of intermusicality (Kolarova 1998: 45) can be encountered in Butor's books *Intervalles*, *Description de San Marco* (Butor 1963: 78), and *L'Emploi du temps* (Butor 1995: 89). Interarchitecturality (Kolarova 2019: 133) is present in Butor's *Description de San Marco* (1963: 115). Finally, interphotography (Kolarova 2019: 134) is exceptional in the postcard created by Butor, Badin, and Éric Coisel.

The intersection between the arts completes the idea of the book as a *world – painting*. In the interior, the exterior is reflected as on the postcard by Butor, Badin, and Coisel, where the specular effect is quite explicit through the juxtaposition of the photo and the painting. However, the effect of continuity is implied by the mirror effect (the branch of the tree ends on the photo, with the shadow of the branch). Moreover, the circular effect and the unity of the arts are accentuated by Butor's verse about the two artistic fields of painting and photography. The triple interartistic effect represents an interiorized soul of the world whose surface is mirrored at two levels: first for the relationship between the arts, and second for the relationship with the natural. We translate as an example an artists' book (Butor & Leick 2011: 5), in which Butor wrote in green, yet the images evoked were colored. The monotype that Joël Leick had printed in pale green is perfectly in keeping with Butor's emerald-green thoughts, changing musical tone according to the tone of the green that Butor, poet or painter, uses to transcribe or even paint his musical notes. There is an endless line of words in succession that run across the bottom of the book like a refrain, a musical or pictorial garland at the same time. "The autumn tree" represents a phrase by Michel Butor, a painting by Georges Badin, and a photo by Eric Coisel.



Figure 2. “L’arbre d’automne dépose sur le mur aux inscriptions des feuilles de route pour la rentrée prochaine.” Butor (“The autumn tree puts roadmaps for the next school year on the wall.” Butor).

However, the effect of continuity on the map is implied by the mirror effect (the branch of the tree ends in the photo, with the shadow of the branch). Moreover, the arts trace a circularity whose unity is accentuated by Butor’s verse on the two artistic fields of painting and photography. It is also a mini atlas of the arts, mapped by the three artists Butor, Badin, and Coisel. This last analysis proves the inextricable link that unites the arts in their connivance, as well as the dialectical relationship established between the historical exterior of the present moment and the interiority of the lived moment that submerges in the moment. “Ink” and “mud,” “words” and “seeds.” This is a verse by Butor, on Badin’s canvas, in *Labour*, one masterpiece which exists in *Carrousel* where we can observe the same interartistic correspondence. This verse-image-sound further catalyzes the correlation between the natural world and the artistic world. Michel Butor is making an artists’ book with Eric Coisel, whose original photos of Tokyo umbrellas in 2008 enter into the poetics of the Butorian city. Butor is inspired by the ephemeral, and his poetic verve is inexhaustible. Coisel leads him in his quest for retrospection, for the transparency of the umbrellas, which multiply in succession, whose shades fade from dark gray to white and finally into a diaphanous diamond through which the world is reborn in color, but which can be spied on. The umbrellas that fascinate Butor from *The Change of Heart (La Modification)* change their geometrical forms to recreate the universe in its richness; they are transformed into real mirrors that give the retrospect under Eric Coisel’s photos to which Butor breathes life under another pictorial image in verse. Butor is also inspired by the cinematographic effect that Badin’s paintings and Coisel’s photos can have. Thus the effect is triply interartistic, and the effect sought by Butor is interartistic par excellence. There are photos of Coisel’s India that reappear with a missing element, without or with the child, and this confers an intercinematographic (Kolarova 2018: 230) effect. When a billboard of the

city's ultramodern appearance flashes in *trompe-l'œil*, fitting well into the urban landscape, the effect is fourfold, taking the photo, a moving frame of a film strip, being both a painting or a frame of the city that Butor poetizes in verse. It is a polyphonic interartistic phenomenon. Places of water in *Parasols* (Badin, 2007: 1) sometimes turn into a chaos of colors evoking the pre-creation period, and sometimes into a delicious Italian decoration. However, the tone never ceases to surprise us, the tone of color as well as of sound. The parasols change like Monet's cathedrals, an entire exquisite series of vivid sensations. The book-objects that the parasols represent are proof of Badin's desire to go beyond borders because Butor writes on the obverse and reverse sides of the canvases, going beyond borders as well. Butor writes on the surface of these objects. It was relevant in his exhibition at Maison de la catalanité (Badin 2011).

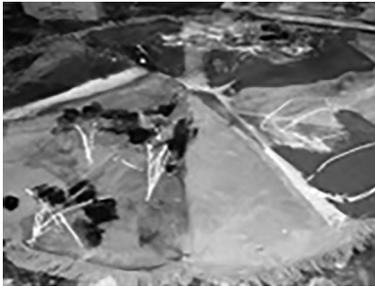


Figure 3. Georges Badin. *Parasols* (2007)

Badin's and Butor's work shows the splendor of the *rainbow* arts. Coisel also creates pictures of India in which the colors are threaded one after the other to break up the forms to which they belong and recreate other images on the surface, which creates a fabulous effect, all the more so because Butor's verses stimulate us to a new reading of the picture. Where the splendor of transparent colors is stunning is Badin's canvases (Badin 2011: 3) of his exhibition in Perpignan, with whom Butor made hundreds of artists' books, including the sublime *Le Jardin catalan*. Of the sixteen poems that make up this book, "L'Horticulteur itinérant" (The Itinerant Horticulturist), is distributed in the most diverse sections: "Du balcon basque" (From the Basque Balcony), "Du promontoire Catalan" (From the Catalan Promontory), "Du bosquet chinois" (From the Chinese Grove), "Du labyrinthe levantant" (From the Levantine Labyrinth), "De l'échappée nordique" (From the Nordic escape), and "De l'embarcadère vénitien" (From the Venetian Landing Stage). In this way, we can see that the image of *Le Jardin catalan* spreads to other geographical areas: it is disseminated around the world (Giraud 2011: 25). In *Carrousel*, we have free canvases by Badin with poems by Butor, on both sides this time. This forms a single page, meant to fold in two, like the pages of a book.

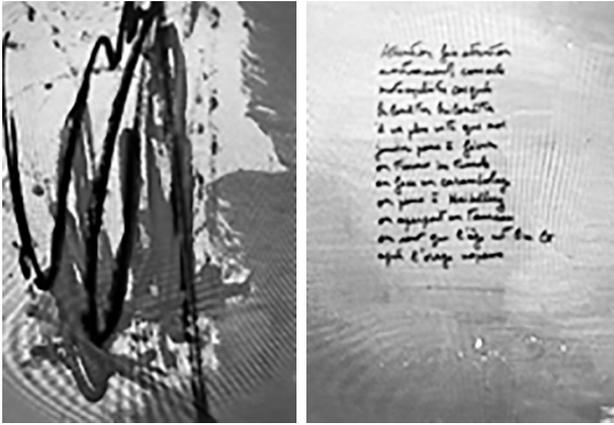


Figure 4. Georges Badin & Michel Butor. *Carrousel* (2014)

“This book was produced in 2014, in three copies in Eric Coisel’s *Mémoires* collection. It includes handwritten poems by Michel Butor and original paintings by Georges Badin” (16 pages, 50 × 33 cm; Badin & Butor 2014: 5). Butor liked transparency because it allows for a multiple vision. Now, the arts are relays of interminable correspondences. Each work is triggered like a fragment of the artistic world, of which it is a part. However, sometimes geometry supplants the primacy of colors, the brushstrokes leaving sober traces, gray, green, blue. It gives way to space, to infinity in space as the title indicates—“24 Trièdres temporels,” “Articulations” (Butor, Badin 2010: 3, 5)—and to time, as Butor’s lines attest. The poet travels through time before computers; how did we write? Dactylo-typo-graphies, Bic pens, pens, brushes, punches for wax tablets. Before photography, how did we remember while painting? Now digital technology allows us to photograph.

Interartistic time does not exist as a temporality; it represents the eternity of the moment experienced when perceiving a work of art composed of several arts. The sensation arises outside of time; this outside of time is also interartistic. The interartistic phenomenon is on the edge between the non-time and the non-place of Badin and Butor. The music evokes this sensation, guiding the creation outside of time and place: “in the poem alongside the colors and lines on the page, he [Butor] gives this song the horizontal line of the verse that comes to prolong the imperfect strokes of the painter’s branches [Badin]” (Badin 2007: 7). The colored strokes are traced to the point of emerging gracefully, but without artifice, outside the painting to recreate a sublime world. This would explain the absence of the stretcher in Badin’s paintings. The work is a world to be recreated. It is a book-world that is reborn from its ashes, ever more resplendent. Thus

in Badin's recent paintings one discerns the desire to revive the scriptural line through colors; it is this unexplored side that we had not thought of until now. The paintings of time by Badin (Badin 2014: 12) are magnetic paintings because of this particularity. The colors keep coming back on the palette and in the writings of Butor and Badin, whose source of violet and white is light: "If you open the book, you can already read the purple, the poem imposes the image on you. White and even the stones contributed to this dominant colour, but one tended not to stop, as later on in his paintings he would try to give the stone the colour of light or of the sky and, to reach the abyss and its blackness, which quickly disappeared, by the way, since the sand appeared again, the excessive lightness of water bubbles with all the colours imagined. Let us return to the poet's house, to the mountains, to the paths he takes, to the open front door, to the canvas he holds in his hands and which, on contact with the air, escapes from him, flies" (Badin 2010: 1). This is a text on Badin's website, "The search for the world-book: trophies, invitations, distances" (*La recherche du livre-monde: trophées, invitations, distances*). This is a text by Badin for Marie-Jo and Michel Butor, dated July 26th, 2010. It is an infinite reservoir of visions, but at the same time they bear the imprint of the liveliness of Coisel's photos. It is an interphotographic relief that only increases the weight of the vision that multiplies under the gaze. Thus interartistic time supplants time, and memory becomes eternal.



Figure 5. Michel Butor's house, currently a museum (Lucinges, France)

The castle of Lucinges, near Butor's house, will be transformed into a "Manor of Books." Annemasse Aglo bought Butor's library, which consists of the artists' books, works of art, personalized cards, and gifts made by the writer to his wife. An exhibition of 103 of the artists' books was held on the occasion of the Manor of Books. The books were digitized for viewing. The most recent exhibition took place in December 2021. The Butorian space can be visited like a map or a globe: "In ancient texts, I think of the sacred texts, we start from the writing and go to the image. It's

illumination. I listen to the images” (*L’Humanité*, July 16th, 2013). It is the same vision that Badin shares on the canvas, infinite. The movement is reversible in time and space.

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