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MICHEL BUTOR

Bricolage: An Interview with Michel Butor¹

Martine Reid If I have been eager to interview you and to place this interview as the lead piece of a journal issue devoted to writing and drawing, to the readable and the visible, it is because it seems to me that among contemporary writers, you are the one of those who has most clearly striven to prove the double affirmation which you yourself have formulated: "Painting is also something we read . . . literature is also something we look at."² A similar remark opens a text which you published in 1969, *Les Mots dans la peinture*. On the subject of words which hold your attention in painting and of which you propose a list (title, signature, address, maxims, rebus, proverbs, various inscriptions in which words are reified), you write, "the presence of these words ruins . . . the retaining wall our teaching constructs in between literature and the arts."³

Michel Butor Yes. You know, this is even more clear in France than it is in the United States. Generally in the United States, art schools are part of the university. Any self-respecting university maintains an art museum. It is not true of France; art schools are considered as something completely exterior to university teaching. As a result, it is very difficult to build bridges between the disciplines. It's true for painting; it's also true for music. In the United States, conservatories are part of the university. All this goes to show to what extent there are walls in

1. The following interview was conducted at Michel Butor's home in Lucinges on 29 September 1992. I am deeply grateful for the generous gift of his time.

2. Michel Butor and Patrick Stefanetto, "Entretien," *Traitements de textes: Cartes et brouillons* (Gourdon: Dominique Bedou Editeur, 1985), 17.

3. Butor, *Les mots dans la peinture* (Geneva: Skira/Flammarion, 1969), 5.

France and in other European countries. Art, literature, and music are not departments inside a single institution; they are considered completely distinct institutions unto themselves.

M. R. From this point of view, we can assert right away that all of your works seek to undermine—systematically, stubbornly, playfully—compartmentalization, the division of techniques, but also the division of knowledge, of which we know the long and capricious history.

M. B. Certainly. My work is one of undermining [*travail de sape*]. I have always sought to build bridges across borders, be they the borders between the arts, or the borders between countries. For me, these two things are linked together. To build bridges across borders doesn't mean that these borders do not exist, that they have not been, and even now are not, justified. It is much too easy to say, "There are no more borders; anyone can do anything; etc." It's not true, and this isn't the question. The question is how to show that these borders which distinguish different fields, and rightly so, are not permanent and impermeable. We absolutely must understand that the borders between nations are not the same as they were one hundred years ago, that the borders between the activities of the mind and between the institutions which take charge of them are not the same either. Clearly there is considerable inertia; changing institutions is very difficult, even when actual practices have already evolved considerably. We have quite a hard time changing teaching; it's extraordinarily difficult to change such weighty institutions. In the same way, altering the borders between peoples presents extraordinary difficulties. I've always tried to show that first of all, borders are not constant, that the establishment of these borders was linked to a specific situation; and then as a corollary, that these borders could and should be crossed, even if to cross a border does not mean to abolish it. We can easily understand that there is a region in which people speak German and a region in which people speak French. We can draw the line between these two regions on a map. This is completely different from preventing the French from going to visit the Germans. Very often there are phenomena, movements, which cause borders to harden. As we know only too well, borders can become stifling and murderous. The dotted lines on the cartographer's map can be transformed into walls of flame . . .

M. R. You have published quite a lot on painting and painters. Regarding art criticism, and particularly a text of Vieira Da Silva, you said, "it is not truly art criticism; it is a text which comes out of viewed painting."⁴

4. Butor and Stefanetto, 17.

M. B. There are all kinds of possible connections between text and painting. The first of these connections is the text which speaks of painting. There can also be texts—and we have seen only too many these past few years—which state that one cannot talk about painting, but to say that one cannot talk about painting is itself to talk about painting. This is the first connection: a text about painting, an art history text for example, a critical text; in this case all forms are possible. All of these texts about painting obviously play an important role in terms of the way in which we look at painting. There are also texts in which there are passages of art criticism. For example there may be passages of art criticism in great novels, because the novelist uses pictorial references to render a description. In French literature, two examples immediately come to mind: Balzac and Proust. Then, there is a second connection between text and painting: a text next to a painting. As soon as a text is placed next to a painting, a new object is produced. Let's say that it is an object which has two parents, a parent-text and a parent-painting. This is what generally happens in an artist's book. Finally there is a third connection: a text which is located within a painting. It is the text within the painting which absolutely forces us to realize a fact, one which should be obvious, that writing is a visible thing. Writing is a way of making language visible. In an illustrated book, you are dealing with a fundamental plastic structure which is the rectangle of the double page, with, on the right for example, a rectangular plate, the reproduction of a painting, and on the left, a rectangle of text. All one has to do is to move away a bit to see that the rectangle of text is also a rectangle of drawing and color, that it is a *gray color*. Moreover, it is in just this way that the designers of art history books treat the text: there must be a pretty gray color. In this structure, the text already is presented as an image. In Western culture, especially in the nineteenth century (and we can begin to wonder why), the image-text was considered as something so different from the image in the ordinary sense of the word that it was deemed absolutely necessary to put borders between the two, that it was dangerous to bring these two elements together. As soon as text enters into the rectangle, I might call it the sacred rectangle of traditional Western painting, then, despite all the entreaties (academic as well as judicial, etc.), one cannot help but notice that writing is drawing, that writing is image. There, the text has a considerable influence not only on the way in which we perceive the painting (we interpret it of course), but also on the manner in which we profit from it, we look at it. It is a part of the painting; we can easily see that writing entails lines alongside other lines, the com-

position of the whole takes account of this. If it is the painter himself who has written the words, he manages the situation on his own. If it is a writer on the one hand and a painter on the other, problems of very intimate dialogue are born; and there the writer notices not only that he is speaking of painting, but that he is making painting, and not in the common metaphoric sense, but in the sense of Horace, *ut pictura poesis*, which is very important, but in a much more literal way.

M. R. Very early on, you began to consider, “la peinture comme trajet,” painting as a journey, I am thinking particularly of the work of Jackson Pollock which haunts a text like *Mobile*. Is it because this type of painting calls for/recalls writing? In terms of hand movements at least . . .

M. B. Indeed, especially with Pollock, gesture recalls (with differences of course) the gesture of writing through a very important concept. In late nineteenth-century writing, as it is represented in painting, ink was used, a liquid pigment, which was not the case in painting. Pasty pigments were used in oil painting, or in certain instances liquid pigments such as watercolors, but this dried very quickly. . . . Pollock, on the other hand, uses a liquid paint which creates a kind of thread, and this is very close to handwriting. In this respect, we must remember that there has been an evolution in writing. Ancient writings are letter by letter, then, gradually, there are links between the letters. It is said that writing became more and more cursive. Subsequently, we find a distinction between words, which derives from the fact that a word is made practically from a single stroke, an extraordinarily complicated stroke, much more complicated than the movements of any figure skater, much more complicated than most strokes by painters on their surface. In very cursive writings, some words may be linked with each other. Pollock’s painting recovers this ductility of writing. We might say that Pollock’s art rediscovers a kind of elementary writing, but his stroke didn’t take him as far as writing. He confronts the structures of this genre and then figurative structures, etc., all sorts of things, but from the perspective of writing, he remains in what I call *infrawriting*; he remains a scribbler. As part of the traditional writer’s activities—assuming that he must write by hand—there is quite often an escape toward a kind of liberated stroke, and that is scribbling. To scribble is to take possession of a space. It is clear with Pollock that certain of his paintings are immense scribblings, which incidentally gives them a remarkable “childlike” quality. In a sense, we find ourselves, there, on the margins of writing. One might study the connections between

actual writing and scribblings in manuscripts. There are areas of readable writing and then we have areas where the bad pupil starts to scribble. Writers are bad pupils at times. Thus there are scribblings in manuscripts, and between scribbling and writing, neat writing [*l'écriture au propre*] as we say, there are all kinds of marvellous phenomena, such as erasures, cut text, pasted text, etc., which take on often extraordinary plastic qualities. There are three steps: scribbling, the rough draft, and finally the actual text. We should quickly note a few things about the rough draft. There are phenomena of agitation involved, since the writer will correct himself; this heightens the kind of dance we find on the page and in the rough draft, especially with certain writers. We can see that these writers are not content with a sort of furrowing labor, line by line; no, the motion of the hand creates all kinds of detours and returns. To bring writing into painting, the painter will encounter different problems. With static lettering, in which each letter is considered a stable figure (which is what occurs in inscriptions and in the European Middle Ages for example), the painter who wants to put writing into his picture is confronted with stable figures which he paints without much difficulty. If writing becomes very cursive, this presents us with different problems. There are "cursive" painters; there are painters who use liquid pigments, who have long brush strokes (I am thinking of El Greco). Then the difficulty will be the reverse. This pictorial cursiveness displaces writerly cursiveness, which is usually readable. With El Greco, in the Evangelists series, we find all kinds of examples of unreadable writing, hypercursive writings . . .

M. R. Here we pick up on a series of things which you said in *Les Mots dans la peinture*, specifically that painting is in no way "pure vision." In the progression of these ideas, I would like to come back to your collaboration with painters; I am thinking especially of Christian Dotremont and Alechinsky. Why did you make this choice, to work as a writer in painting?

M. B. Christian Dotremont was originally a writer. He was the writer in the Cobra group. He became a painter gradually, starting with writing and developing certain aspects of writing. He is truly a painter of the written. I know several of his images which are not directly writing; I can think of a certain number of sketches; but for the most part, his works are logograms, writings which have been transformed in such a way that they are difficult to read. There is a translation into more readable writing on one side, and the search for a buried word is

one of the essential elements of perception in these works. With all the members of the Cobra group, there is a certain cursiveness in gesture, in stroke; but it is certainly Alechinsky who has the clearest confrontation with writing.

M. R. You yourself from time to time have lent your writing to this kind of work.

M. B. Of course. I have done a certain number of books in which there is manuscript, then there are works in which I have written some text; and certain painters have taken manuscripts as material. Alechinsky used not only manuscripts in its conventional meaning, but also used *typescripts* [*tapuscrits*], in other words typed pages, with deletions, rough draft effects.

M. R. What interests me in this kind of procedure, since we are discussing the work of undermining, is the principle by which, the traditional *auctoritas* is destabilized. Who is the author? Jacques Derrida asserts somewhere, "Il faut être plusieurs pour écrire" [One must be several in order to write]. Is it the same thing here? One must be several to paint, or to write-paint?

M. B. The principle of the traditional *auctoritas*, but traditional only recently, is something which is questioned, and which is brought to life in a different way by all this kind of work. One must be several to write, and this in several different ways. The romantic idea that the work of art is individual expression is something which we must completely revise. This in no way prevents individuals from having a central importance in works of art, but the individual is only a link in an extremely complex chain. When we read someone's book, we never read the work of a single individual, if only because we hold a material object in our hands, an object which is the result of a complex of industrial and commercial process, and because that process—it cannot be said enough—informs the whole business. In order to be published, one must follow a certain number of rules, some written, some not. The writer is often quite insignificant compared to the object itself. In many publishing houses, the writer is only a prop to publicity. Also, the writer writes within the language [*langue*]. No writer has invented the language in which he writes. He transforms it; he introduces a style, new frequencies in vocabulary and syntactical relationships; but these always preexist him. One writes within a language as one writes within a literature, by transforming it. Thus what today's writer writes prevents the reading of

other writers, living as well as dead. The reader does not have an infinite time for reading. If he sets aside a certain number of hours for one particular author, he cannot set it aside for another.

M. R. It seems to me that particularly in your work with painters (I am coming back to this subject), you are seeking to remain as close as possible to a situation which might be called "l'écriture a lieu" [writing takes place]. I like this term, since fortuitously it conjugates space (writing in situ) with time (its moment, its immediacy).

M. B. The space of writing: what does this mean? It means the space where a writer puts words to paper. It can be a painter's studio, or a printing house, or a study. Inside this study, there is a more restricted space which is the very medium of writing; in our culture it is paper, but doubtless not for long. In *L'Emploi du temps*, I think we can easily see the imbrication of places: the city which one does not leave; the character who always writes in his study; then there is the table and the page which he writes on. All this is the physical space of writing, but if we look at it a bit closer, all the cultural elements appear as necessarily implicated.

M. R. Once again, let's come back to you. How do you conceive of rough drafts and manuscripts? You spoke of this just a little while ago.

M. B. There are two separate things. There is the rough draft, the outline, etc., and then the manuscript. In working with painters, I have tried to use a certain number of the plastic elements of the manuscript. In these cases, the manuscripts are as neat as possible, even if from time to time certain erasures remain; but in any case, I make it as readable as I can. Before reaching the stage of the final manuscript, there are several steps. I think about the nineteenth-century writers who had their texts copied before entrusting them to an editor. Flaubert's definitive manuscripts are not written in Flaubert's hand. As far as my rough drafts are concerned, at the beginning I wrote by hand, but very quickly I began to work on a typewriter. With certain passages there was a manuscript version first, then a typed version. With a certain number of texts, I rewrote the pages, sometimes more than twenty times. If I had left everything in, there would be twenty different stages. I worked on my texts a great deal with a typewriter. Generally, once I had a typed version, I reread, corrected by hand, retyped, and then again, until my texts achieved a kind of stability, not that I found them perfect, but, weary, I stopped correcting them. There is a moment when I find everything equally poor. Then there is nothing else to do

but to publish. Now I have finally entered the modern age; I use a Macintosh. This allows me to revise a great deal on the computer, yet all the same I still go through several versions since many errors remain. In my last years of teaching, I didn't have the time to do longwinded works. All my latest works were written in pieces; they are mosaics, quilts. When I retired, I imagined that I could recover my longwindedness, but for the time being this is not the case. For years, I've worked by bits and pieces; I write quite short texts. They can be used in their original form; thereafter they can be combined, integrated, etc. Most of the time, for these texts I do a first draft in a little notebook. These are my original rough drafts. It is the rough outline of writing with illuminations, scribbling, erasures. Afterwards I move on to the computer. If the text is an article or an essay, I don't need an original manuscript version. I need a manuscript version only for poetic texts. Generally I do poems upon request. I wrote a lot of poetry in my youth. I was a postsurrealist romantic, with a bit of automatic writing thrown in, a faucet you turn on and let run. But since then, when I've written poems, it has always been in response to a request. In that respect, I'm completely opposed to the poetic theory which I call postromantic and which still holds sway with most contemporary poets. My poetry is always occasional poetry. It is always requested by someone or something, a painter or a musician, or anyone else. If I accept, it's because I have the feeling that I can do something. There's always a moment in which I don't have any idea what I am going to do and then—notably if I am walking in the woods—suddenly there it is: a thread starts to appear and I pull on this thread. This is what happens when I work in notebooks During these walks, ideas come to me, and I feel the need to write them down. Before, this didn't happen; I had a pretty good memory and if ideas came to me, they stayed with me. Actually, I felt that my memory performed a necessary selection process. But now it works less well; that's why I carry notebooks . . .

M. R. With regard to rough drafts and manuscripts, I thought of words I've seen here and there, neologisms, such as "tapuscrits" [typescripts], "pictuscrits" [pictuscripts] What do you mean by these?

M. B. We lack the words we need to describe a certain number of objects which we nevertheless use constantly. Things don't happen in quite the same way when we write by hand and when we type; this is why we need other names. The word *tapuscrit* is obviously a burlesque neologism; it allows us to mock the neologisms of so many literary theoreticians who

create useless words, which, moreover, are quickly abandoned *Pictuscrit*, I don't think I invented that word, which designates an object, a text in which there is painting, in which the pictorial appears. Furthermore, I have also used the word *ordinuscrit* [computoscript], because phenomena are so different when one works on the typewriter or on the computer that here as well a different word is essential.

M. R. I would like for you to speak of another practice, one which concerns correspondence, the habit which you have adopted of cutting up a postcard, pasting it together again, of adding to it as needed a piece of another card, of making a hole and putting a bit of string through it, then of sending this "product," along with a few words, to your addressee. What exactly is this transaction?

M. B. It comes from the fact that I correspond copiously. I'm not complaining, on the contrary. But to receive mail, one must also nourish the mail. Consequently, one must respond to letters which one receives. I respond as often as possible to the letters I receive, but now I can't always face up to it. I have used the postcard format so that I can write letters more easily; and by the way the format has become oversized. I was too cramped. The postcard is my excuse to write very brief texts, if you will. In any case, people who receive the card receive something personalized. I get by with brevity. I think I must have started to cut up cards about twenty or twenty-five years ago. In the beginning it was greeting cards, and then as usual new ideas came to me I continue on. I also have friends who help me, who make postcards so that I can cut them up, paste them together . . .

M. R. "Principle of redemption," that is what Lyotard calls this practice. You produce something else, a derived product, a "quasi-postcard."⁵ Lyotard observes that the gesture is a curious one, notably because one comes to reconsider what is above all a touristic commonplace. Faced with all these disparate practices (from the novel, the nouveau roman, to the redemption of the postcard), how do you conceive of the work [l'œuvre]? Must we reexamine the concept?

M. B. Doubtless. If one questions the notion of *auctoritas*, then automatically the question comes to bear on the notion of *l'œuvre*. This doesn't mean that these notions, the work and its creator, cannot be useful at a certain level. But, as I said, the work never belongs to a single

5. Jean-François Lyotard, "Sites et récits de sites," in Butor, *Traitements de textes*, op. cit., 9–14.

creator. Whether he knows it or not, the author is part of an enormous collaboration, behind him, around him, on all sides. Collaborative works only prove that which exists in any artistic process. Thus the notion of the work of art must also be relativized. By my understanding, it is advisable to insist especially on the character of activity and operation, rather than that of the work of art.

M. R. The word which comes to mind when one thinks of these practices, of all these operations as you call them, is that of *bricolage*. Roland Barthes has cited the word to qualify *Mobile*. Does that still suit you: Michel Butor as Monsieur Bricolage?

M. B. Oh yes! In any case, I am not a *bricoleur* in the current sense of the term. I am a very poor man-about-the-house. I am a *bricoleur* only metaphorically. I am a *bricoleur* in the sense that one can define *bricolage* as a way of putting together elements which come from different areas. Roland Barthes spoke of *bricolage* in this sense when he discussed *Mobile*. The practice of collage, of cutting up, etc., all this is linked to that. But I would say that the notion of *bricolage* has two levels. First, there is the *bricoleur*, the one who knows how to make something. Most men are *bricoleurs*. To tinker about [*bricoler*], they use the tools which are furnished them by department store chains. This is the vulgar aspect of *bricolage*. The other level is the invention of material. This is what I would like to call the gathering of significant objects, the recovery of what has been eliminated, thrown out. This is very important for me. It is recycling. Each time there is a phenomenon of collage in twentieth-century painting, there is the phenomenon of recycling. I find some of this in my own work. This is the phenomenon of the quest for lost objects, for the disdained object to which we will give a new life and a new dignity; we will be forced to look at it in a different way. It is important for me, because today we move easily from the lost object, the object which has been thrown out, to the lost man, thrown out in the big cities; think of the United States in particular. Consequently, for me recycling always ends up as human recycling.

—Translated by Noah Guynn