After the “crise de vers” and the progressive fading away of formally recognizable poetic texts in French poetry, from Mallarmé’s “Sonnet en -ix” to the Dada “bruitist poems” of T. Tzara and P. Albert-Birot, the poetic vanguard of the early twentieth century invested its time and imagination in the investigation of poetry as a sound system. This type of experiment went to the ultimate limit of poetic expression barely short, in many cases, of the minimalist cry of the creature. The poetic exploration in the mid twentieth century revisited the formal graphism of the traditional poem and pretended to follow the recommendations of Apollinaire in “L’esprit nouveau” by taking poetry down the path of “calligrammatic” figures; Pierre Garnier wrote the manifesto of poetic spatialism that established poetry as an onomatopoeia of form, Jean-Pierre Faye wrote a poem that was an X, Maurice Roche introduced colored lines and systematic typographic disorder to show his dissidence from the order of “compact” prose.

A century after the “crise de vers”, French poetry went through a “crise de poésie”. The emergence of “transgendered” critical concepts such as “text”, “écriture” was explicitly presented by prosators and poets alike (Ponge, Butor) as the end of the now unnecessary distinction between prose and poetry. Under such a new writing protocol it became superfluous to invest in any effort to uncover the true nature of poetry. The first casualty was the long lasting label of “avant-garde”; somehow the term was found to be solely associated with poetic research. Writers of all sorts became simply the representatives of the “écriture contemporaine” or not. The ones that missed the old label simply coined the term “extrême contemporain”.

There were, however, a few irreducible writers and critics attached to the distinction between prose and poetry. The consensus was that certain poetry was “inadmissible”, “dead”, “conventionalist”, etc. but that there was still a need to pursue the inquiry into the concept of “poetry” as the only possible path towards poeticity, as the sole way to contribute to an understanding of the plasticity of writing.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze how several contemporary writers still attached, in many different ways, to the concept of poetry, are merging their writing research with the more encompassing visual culture by placing photography at the core of their poetic practice. I have chosen three different modes of photographic embedding that have in common as point of departure the explicit preservation of poetry.

Since his assertion that poetry was “inadmissible” in 1972 (Le Mécrit), Denis Roche has been engaged in the development of “fictions” that pursue the search of the “unknown” that was once at the core of poetry as it may have interested philosophers. In that process
Roche is using a string of photographs that as an ensemble construct apparent narrative fictions that are ruled by time (a time stamp even reinforces what is a given in the most prosaic narrative) but in fact are associated without explicit semantic directions. In addition, within this “incoherent” linearity, each picture appears as a mystery that is difficult to “interpret” by itself and as well in relation to the whole. His post-1970 prose-fictions present an increasing portion given over to the visual component and it is well established that, for him, photography and literature constitute an inseparable ensemble: “Le cadrage implique qu’il y ait quelque chose autour de la photographie et, pour moi, l’autour de la photographie, c’est la littérature. Les secondes sont des photographies de pages de livres de même format que la précédente série. L’idée était de proposer au spectateur une correspondance entre le cadrage photographique, extérieur, physique, et le cadrage mental, celui de l’écriture. » (2001).

In Fortino Sámano (Paris: Galilée, 2004) by Virginie Lalucq and Jean-Luc Nancy, the picture is used as a pretext and the poetic text (presented explicitly as such) is written on the back of the picture. The dispositif of the relation photography/poetic text is thus presented in the theoretical frame that Michel Leiris used to call “au verso des images”. The poem is formally arranged in a homological relationship to the organization of the picture itself: the poem has its back to the picture just as Fortino has his back against the wall, literally. The book’s subtitle is “Les débordements du poème” indicating that while poem and picture stand on the opposite side of the piece of paper one cannot exist without the other (as the brand of Sámano’s cigar, “Te-Amo”, suggests: je t’aime, moi non plus) and thus both overflow onto each other. To complete this dual physical dispositif Nancy’s gloss on the poem and its relation to the picture adds a layer that elevates the whole into a visual “sustainable dynamic illustration” (Jan Baetens, FPC, 2).

Jean-Marie Gleize is probably the most astute critic of D. Roche’s poetry. Following Roche’s remark that “literature is clean and neat, photography is messy; it is the realm of the approximate”, Gleize, in his own use of photography, relies mostly on blurry Polaroids whose lack of obvious semantic determination encourages intellectual inquiry by the observer. The visual realm thus fully participates in the “postpoetry” project of Gleize defined as such: “What remains for us is poetry. The ignorance of what it is. Writing it, doing, just for the sake of knowing. In order to proceed forward within such an ignorance. In order to know the quintessence of such an ignorance. In order to elucidate it ». While Roche « still » distinguishes between literature and photography, Gleize considers them equivalent manifestations of the resistance of the real to any form of writing interpretation. His
“journal infime” that seamlessly mixes pictures and texts constructs a hermeneutic aporia. In an antimodernism movement similar to the artistic minimalism movement of the late twentieth century, Gleize enters the visual universe to affirm that, today, for him, poeticity is first and foremost a reflection on the plasticity of forms, a modest effort to maintain any mode of discourse at the surface of things.

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