

Around the Literary

Our call for submissions for this issue circulated with the slightly pedantic, and for Tessera, oddly inappropriate, title, "Non-Literary Genres." Potential writers for this issue rightfully inquired what we meant. What is the "non-literary"? Or, as Jennifer Henderson put it to us: "At what point does writing pass into a realm recognized as literary?" Conversations, queries and observations around the literary ensued.

Tessera has long published feminist representations that work at deconstructing dominant codes, texts which interrupt the process of 'smooth communication,' in order to defamiliarize common (ie. misogynist, racist, heteronormative) sense. Because this kind of writing takes the risk of being difficult, it can appear, at first, a bit solipsistic; it can be mistaken, ironically, for a "disinterested structure of words" (to use Northrop Frye's definition of properly literary language). This institutionalized understanding of the literary relies on a sharp opposition between rhetorical, argumentative, situated linguistic practices and an autonomous field of "disinterested," self-referential literary language. According to this definition, the writing published in *Tessera* over the years has been consistently non-literary, because of its insistence on language itself as a loaded political context. Our attempt to renegotiate *Tessera's* reputation as a 'difficult' journal

Once words are dispossessed, positioned outside and around the literary frame, all that remains is the search for context. Where? Why? Who? Context is everything. Reading through the pieces in this volume, I begin to search for the thing that is everywhere. I wander through the gallery of these texts reading the plaques of context on the walls beside them, the ones that name title, year, artist, nationality. Conning the texts into meaningful frames for understanding, I am more aware of my own desiring route toward knowing everything than I am of the thing, the words.

—kb

with this issue is thus a paradoxical one, for hasn't *Tessera* always occupied the space of the non-, the para-, the extra-literary? And with this marked introduction of elements of popular culture, we risk reproducing a high/low opposition

that the journal's commitment to border blurring, cross-genre work would seem to contest.

— jh

Dispositions suggests that these artists are out of sorts. If so it's a voluntary marginalization where they can procur and use whatever ideas and materials present themselves in the interests of pre-meditated self-expression. They not only make presentations, they perform, they pirouette, from sight to sound to text, drawing the lines that can be either tenuous or obvious between disparate disciplines to invent new word and image ideas in order to express those certainties that seem to spring from the guts.

One of the most important things about these dispositions is their plasticity and their self-informing moods that never remain still but push the envelope of identity in the endless self-transformations that we are all privilege to. Helen Lee is a filmmaker whose work of subtle and profound beauty gives us a glimpse into the contradictions faced by an Asian woman as Sally, in *Sally's Beauty Spot*, is transformed from sex object to sexual subject.

— ps

The walls of Mile End and Plateau Mont Royal speak of various overlapping

struggles: "crachez sur ceux qui par l'oppression batisse leur maison" (sic), "pourquoi je sex par pussy" (sic), "kill the rapist," "kill your boss," "prends ton Québec par les couilles" (sic), "oui." As I walk the streets of this area, an area where diverse language and cultural groups jostle with one another, where the upwardly mobile cross paths daily with the unemployed and underemployed, where the newly renovated stand adjacent to the utterly derelict, where the rush of the Main at one a.m. gives way to the quiet terror of narrow, deserted side-streets, I realize that there is more graffiti and less signing here

Many of the artists in the issue have also created politically, socially and personally relevant meanings in the found detritus of the culturally discarded. It's a testimonial to the desire for self-representation that can accommodate shifting positions, that can incorporate and transform the most well planned out, or the most randomly accumulated material, and that can risk an existence outside of the rigidity of fixed definition, that can risk making a refusal or having attitude, or indulging its own bliss or suffering over there on another side of the imaginary.

—ps

than I have seen lately in Toronto. Montreal is a space of challenges, of assertions, of questions, of contradictions; it is not a space easily claimed by way of a signature, a distinctive mark. Perhaps this has something to do with the importance of language in Quebec, with the fact that a signature does not (usually) say anything about the language of the signator, with the fact that in Montreal what one writes is always complicated by the language in which one chooses to write it. Even signatures become an excuse for further commentary: on a wall just around the corner from where I live I find an arrow pointing to a signature and the words "attention, ceci est un faux zep." What signatures and graffiti share, of course, is their reference to questions of legitimacy and property: whose name, whose words, whose space, whose right? What I like about graffiti is the complicated ways in which it incorporates a reference to the gendered subject who will read it. Graffiti says more than "I was here"; it does more than stake out territory.

—lm

Context is everything but that doesn't help me solve the problem of knowing how to read what it is. Can I read it in the words "MONEY IS ONLY ONE SYSTEM OF VALUE"? Or must I read the telephone pole, mailbox, or bulletin board on which the words appear? Must I read time and place — Harris's Ontario — to arrive at the everything of the text?

—kb

When Tessera put out a call for issue #20 we asked to see "Non-Literary" Genres (comics, graffiti). Under normal circumstances work comes to us in two ways - unsolicited through the mail, and by a process of poking around and ferreting out. Of course what eventually gathers on our editorial table brings surprises; both unanticipated submissions, and anticipated ones that never arrive.

The comics, through various routes, came easily and in numbers. Women have brought a variety of refreshing, anti-heroic visions to this form. But graffiti was another matter. We did get some indoor wall stuff tumbling out of the squirmy unconscious of the washroom mind. But nothing got submitted from the walls of the outside world.

I started to look around me for language, symbols, or drawings on the city's walls. I asked if anyone knew who was wielding spray cans. I did eventually learn that Toronto has a paint out squad that goes around eliminating all marks within 24 hours, but that couldn't

entirely account for the absence I perceived.

Then I talked with my daughter and found out that mid-nineties graffiti artists don't expect words or images to make an impact on today's world. Their cynicism runs deep. Instead they respond to their sense of invisibility by tagging, that is they develop characteristic signature gestures, and use these marks on any available surface. Still curious I searched "graffiti" on the internet. No statements, protests, poems or visuals came up there either. Instead, as I watched, dense ornate signatures slowly filled themselves in. A shred of identity on a shred of territory.

Underground comings, anonymous graffiti, flyers posted on walls and fences: much of the signage in this issue has an existence "in public" that differs from the usual paths of circulation of 'literary' work. These 'dispositions' belong to a wider field of public art that includes temporary signs, texts requiring new evaluation systems, works that are open to interpretation by the passerby, not just the professional. It includes art that poaches existing systems and situations instead of creating autonomous aesthetic objects for contemplation - even art that aesthetizes, by emptying out, the instrumentality of everyday life signs.

—jh

I guess when the call went out for graffiti I expected a certain kind of response, and was already bored by what I anticipated. However when it turned out that graffiti had a successor in tagging, I didn't run any instances of it to ground. I didn't suggest to the collective that this phenomenon of highlighted identities be allotted space in Tessler. I didn't respond and now I am wondering why I didn't.

— cs

Debra Anderson succinctly and simply gives us an image of that mysterious and shocking moment of self-identification that can alter the trajectory of a life. Leanne Franson, also a comic artist, creates poignancy with one thick line of her pencil. I may not know whether to cringe or laugh but I do know she is providing an access for me into my own experience from another angle.

— ps

In nineteenth-century English-Canada, writing was viewed as literary if it provided moral instruction to readers. The word 'literary' carried connotations of refinement and gentility which it drew from an association with the racialized, gendered and classed figure of the literary lady. (The Toronto Women's Literary Club was able to camouflage its suffragist work with a name that invoked a picture of ladies exercising their 'innate' feminine taste for uplifting verse.) The figure of the white lady was of course deeply implicated in the legitimation of both the colonial and, later, the national-building projects. How does a white feminist literary collective (literary ladies?) negotiate with the history of this figure?

An event like the appropriation of voice debate demonstrates the high stakes of literary recognition, as the translation of oral stories into written, literary texts has involved the displacement of narrators, not to mention revenues, away from Native peoples. What role does literary recognition play in the representation and containment of ethno-linguistic diversity in Canada? How is the opposition between artistic, timeless, universal versus political, contingent, contestatory value put in place through a federal policy of multiculturalism which promotes nostalgic and ossified, rather resisting, versions of minority cultures?

—jh

If context is everything, how do I know that Janice's text is a poem about violence and not a poetic response to violence? I read the words and I know the woman, the place, the history of a female academic's harassment. If I know the context, is it still a poem?

—kb

The process
Beth Learn
has engaged
in to produce
her enigmatic
visual work is
not immedi-

ately apparent. It's only through talking to Beth that I could know she developed her image making process through layering the multiple effects gleaned from the development of a variety of systems, lines drawn according to mathematical formula, text written under rigid self-imposed rules, photographs taken of her performances from 25 years ago, all combined to create a breathlessly beautiful archeology of the self as creator.

— ps

Around 1993, when I first arrived in Montreal, there was a piece of graffiti near "The Word," an English-language bookstore near McGill University that chooses to do without a commercial sign rather than obey official sign laws: "We are a sign that isn't read." As I pointed out above, the particular language

in which the graffiti is written is crucial to its signification. Here, language stands in for the group in the sense that the group actually defines itself as an English-language sign: "We are a sign . . ." At the same time, the graffiti offers a trace of the displaced group by way of their key attribute, the language they speak. Scribbled beneath the line in English was the rejoinder "Commencez par écrire en français—ensuite nous vous lirons!" As a bilingual anglophone who grew up in Ontario but who makes her home in Quebec, I feel both desire and despair upon reading these words—a desire to mediate and despair at the difficulty of doing so. However, just when productive exchange between francophones and anglophones seems most impos-

*The words are divorced from context.
 Moved. Cut. Misplaced. Found.
 Letters escape into the other lines.
 Paragraphs are left out. Words force
 themselves on top of other words.
 Numbers crush language. Phrases
 replace sentences. Things that are not
 words explode into words. Trying to
 reorient myself after the rage and
 violence of the messy divorce, I search
 for where the meanings lie, and am
 surprised when I find the voices of
 women.*

—kb

sible, I realize that there is a kind of exchange. For one thing, each piece of graffiti assumes a reader from another language group. What is more, the French-language response is a sign that the English-language graffiti, however illegitimate, has been read. In this sense, the French-language response throws the ball back into the court of the anglophone writer/reader. The suggestion is that acknowledging the French public face of Quebec and engaging with francophones about questions of culture in French in the public forum is crucial to the visibility of anglophones as well as francophones in the province. This is a challenge that women in particular have taken up, a challenge that has been ongoing in the pages of *Tessera* since the mid-1980s.

—lm