



Reading the Book

READING THE MULTIMEDIA BOOK: THE CASE OF LES FLEURS DU MAL

Contemporary book illustrators have often experimented with mixed media. Roger Bezombes' collage illustrations for Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (Strasbourg: Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, 1985) exemplify this experimentation at its best. The artist's appropriation and juxtaposition of often disparate images from ancient to present day iconography shows the diversity of the text's potential and points to the universality of Baudelaire's poetic gesture. In his articulation of a new architecture for the book, Bezombes provides a robust visual plane whose intersections with the verbal register foster novel conjugations for reader/viewer reception and frame them within unprecedented paradigms of image-text inquiry.

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L'art est le générateur de nouvelles visions du monde, de progrès humain, de désir de l'idéal.

Serge Strizyk

A century has passed since the first illustrations for *Les Fleurs du mal* appeared in 1890. During this time, well over a hundred artists have illustrated Baudelaire's *chef-d'oeuvre*, bringing to it an array of imagery rich in conception and interpretation. The text's influence has even moved beyond the boards of the book to inspire a host of artistic activity in media as varied as painting, drawing, glasswork and furniture design. From Matisse to Magritte, passing by Rouault and Gallé, *Les Fleurs du mal* has given rise to nothing short of a cult of images in which artists, and especially illustrators, have transcended mimesis in their picturing of Baudelaire's poetic universe.¹

Despite the large quantity of illustrated editions of this *nec plus ultra* of nineteenth-century poetic texts, few artists have been willing to experiment with avant-garde notions of the book arts as they apply to architectural modes of technique, format and presentation. To my knowledge, the Parisian artist, Roger Bezombes,² is the first to use collage and mixed media in his interpretation of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Limited to 150 copies and published by Les Bibliophiles de l'Est in 1985, this edition of Baudelaire merits attention. Both the *forme* and the *fond* of the enterprise are experimental in nature. Bezombes questions

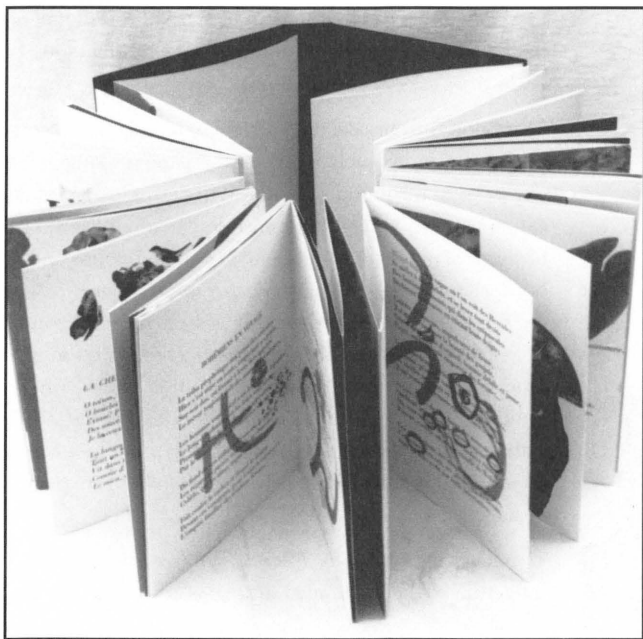


Figure 1
 Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*,
 illustrated by Roger Bezombes,
 designed by Michael Kieffer,
Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.

traditional norms of reader/viewer participation in the arena of image-text inquiry, stretches beyond them, and thus evokes new strategies in framing the poetic gesture.

Bezombes' Baudelaire is, at first glance, a verbal-visual surprise.³ From its black, cloth-covered box and boards springs a dazzling floral tribute which heralds the essential configurations of *Les Fleurs du mal*. The tome's architecture, conceived in collaboration with *éditeur-libraire* Michael Kieffer, is impressive in scale (see figure 1). Sixty-one pages fold out, accordion style, to form a vast panorama 45 feet, 9 inches long by 11 inches high. Several possibilities of "reading" are proposed by this format. The most obvious, a traditional page-by-page approach, is conceivable despite the unsewn spine. But this rapidly proves to be unsatisfactory because the *avant-garde mise en page* resists conventional double-page spreads in which clear delineations are drawn between image and text. As Bezombes' graphics mix with typography and burst across the paginal seams, the overflow encourages the reader/viewer to fold out pages in order to see them as sequences, either flat or standing. In both cases, the graphism may be read from left to right; but in the latter, a slight manipulation of the pages allows for a circular disposition of

the book and, in turn, for a circular “reading” of it. This final guise erases imposed notions of beginning and ending, of *ouverture* and closure.

This book thus breaks the barriers of its boards to become an exhibition. As such, a turn of the page no longer marks our passage through its terrain. With a single glance, it can now be embraced in its entirety. Reading/viewing becomes a perpetual experience at once timeless and borderless in scope. “*J’ai voulu créer un Kakémono*” (I wanted to create a *Kakemono* screen,)⁴ stated Roger Bezombes in a recent interview. But the artist accomplishes so much more here by proposing an architectural scheme whose multiplicity of dispositions recasts Baudelairian aesthetics with insight as the act of reading is rewritten. In a word, the book has moved from private to public, from page to stage.



Figure 2

Roger Bezombes,
cover for Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,
Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.
Permission courtesy of the artist.

The cover of Bezombes' *Fleur du mal* (see figure 2) is a reflection of the innovative strategies at work in the architecture of the book as well as a prefiguration of the illustrator's novel graphic approach. From a black cover, the title is cut out, partially revealing the frontispiece which lies behind it. The format invites voyeurism. Through a series of typographical windows, we view only fragments of the initial image. Immediately, Bezombes equates *les fleurs* with *les femmes*, and the book opens under the sign of a female bouquet (see figure 3). Humor is not absent from this composition in which women are alluded to in such visually vernacular terms as “birds” and “dolls,” and whose feline qualities are vigorously underscored by the presence of four cats. The original maquette for the illustration exhibits Bezombes' use of collage over heavy underpainting. As frontispiece gives way to title page, the typographical cut-out of the black cover is recast against a white background. This time, the imagery is fittingly floral except for the insertion of the female-feline presence in the word “mal”—an appropriate addition in terms of Baudelairian poetics. Author and illustrator are identified on the following fold. Although the dedication of the volume to Théophile Gautier is curiously incomplete, the cat-woman image of the title page's “mal” is reiterated, and the placement of the rose as *cache-sexe* prefigures the sensual proclivities of the textual fabric to follow.

This book's exterior—its somber box, boards and cover—seems to shore up Baudelairian spleen. And yet, its interior immediately flees the thematics of descent and disil-



Figure 3

Roger Bezombes,

frontispiece illustration for Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,
Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.

Permission courtesy of the artist.

lusion in favor of ascent and *idéal*. Over forty-five running feet of image and text proclaim the lighter side of the poet's duality in this panorama drenched in vibrant color. At the outset, the illustrator's intention was to leave aside or outside, in terms of the box and cover, what he sees as Baudelaire's "*côté noir*"⁵ and to focus rather on the first words of the text's title: *Fleurs*. Bezombes' choice of the twenty-five poems in this edition clearly reflects this intentionality. Each piece in some way suggests a floral presence which is, in turn, transcribed onto the graphic scenario, either subtly or overtly. The artist's visual vocabulary is thus predetermined by the textual choices he has made. Herein lies the verbal-visual unity of these *Fleurs du mal*.

As the pages unfold and Bezombes' fresco comes into full view, the proliferation of bouquets recalls the frontispiece but acts with even more precision in refinement of the floral leitmotiv. Like so many signposts across this panorama, the bouquets assure that the textual unity of the verbal plane is preserved. Furthermore, they facilitate intersections between the two. The illustrations for "*Harmonie du soir*" (see figure 4) and "*La Mort des amants*" (see figure 5) typify the bouquet thematic. In the former, a vase decorated with a Lucas Cranach nude serves as the text's "*encensoir*"/"*ostensoir*" as it holds a bunch of roses

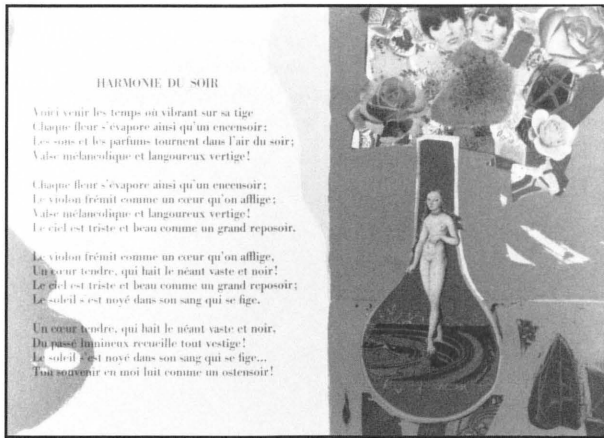


Figure 4

Roger Bezombes,

illustration for "Harmonie du soir"

from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.*

Permission courtesy of the artist.

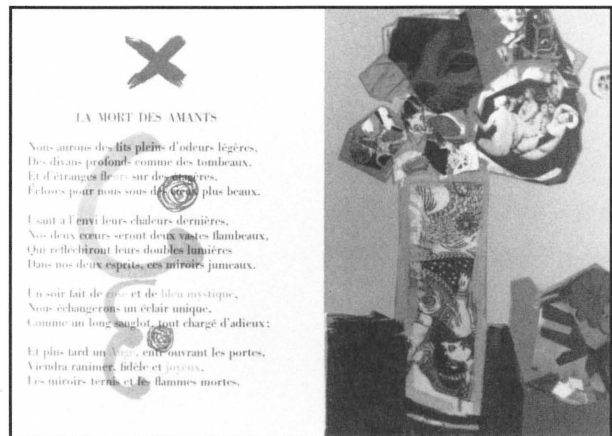


Figure 5

Roger Bezombes,

illustration for "La Mort des amants"

from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,*Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.*

Permission courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6
Roger Bezombes,
illustration for “A Celle qui est trop gaie”
from Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*,
Les Bibliophiles de l’Est, Strasbourg, 1985.
Permission courtesy of the artist.

interspersed with Carnaby Street, Twiggy-like “birds” from the 1960s. In the latter, Ingres’ odalisques bloom next to Asian beauties. Both images use plano-graphic backgrounds to support the collage materials, which heighten the surface and invigorate visual impact. Bezombes’ manipulation of traditional collage fragments mixed with recognizable passages from well-known paintings or popular imagery enriches the reader/viewer’s experience. This mélange is potent because multiple layers of textual meaning are recapitulated onto the visual score. Vases no longer appear in illustrations for “*Le Jet d’eau*” and “*La Mort des artistes*.” Now clustered in constellations on single stems, the bouquet persists as idea, itself container and mirror of Bezombes’ affinities with Baudelaire.

In the illustration for “*A Celle qui est trop gaie*” (see figure 6), the bouquet overflows the page’s edge to become a head-dress for the visage at its center. Bezombes’ red typographic colorations accentuate the words “*couleurs*,” “*ballet de fleurs*” and “*bariole*,” which thus become an integral part of the image. This visual ballet of colors needs no dance to activate its poetic potential; the mesmerizing female gaze largely suffices. A similar linkage between typographical and pictorial planes occurs in the illustration for “*L’Ennemi*” (see figure 7). Only one of the “*fleurs nouvelles*” is necessary to illuminate the narrator’s fervent aspira-

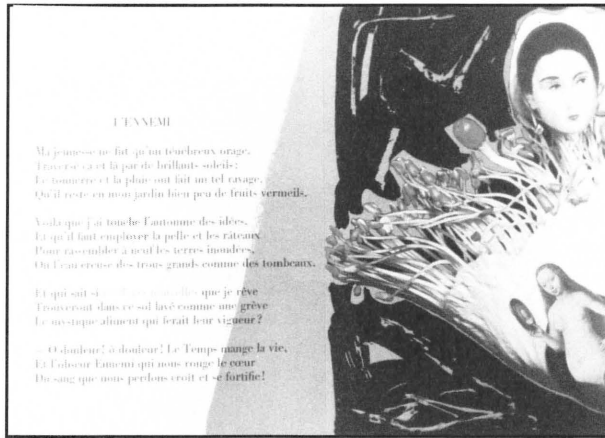


Figure 7

Roger Bezombes,

illustration for "L'Ennemi"

from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,

Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.

Permission courtesy of the artist.

tions. Composed of a collage on collage, the dream it articulates is otherworldly. Bezombes borrows the flower's pistil from a Northern Renaissance nude. The fact that she poses before a mirror insinuates the introspective nature of Baudelaire's text. Pictured as the male entity in the floral cluster, a pierrot-esque narrator dreams with eyes wide open. He alone can pollinate the pistil that instigates lyric creation. In terms of the text, this creation is the sole element capable of holding time, "L'Ennemi," at bay and provoking crystallization of the *idéal*. Bezombes centers on the poem's aspirations, elaborates them in terms of his floral figurations, and extends them onto the visual plane. The intrinsic value of illustration as interpretation thus comes into focus.

Experimentation is the hallmark of Bezombes' graphic gesture. Much of it has to do with the manner in which he constructs and preserves the unity of this work. For example, as a complement to his collages, the artist adopts a Miróesque handwriting which he applies freely over the text. Not only does it become the visual *trait d'union* between the collage bouquets examined earlier, but it also constitutes a new form of *écriture* within the existent verbal-visual context. This painterly writing is sometimes limited to a single poem on a single page. More often, it

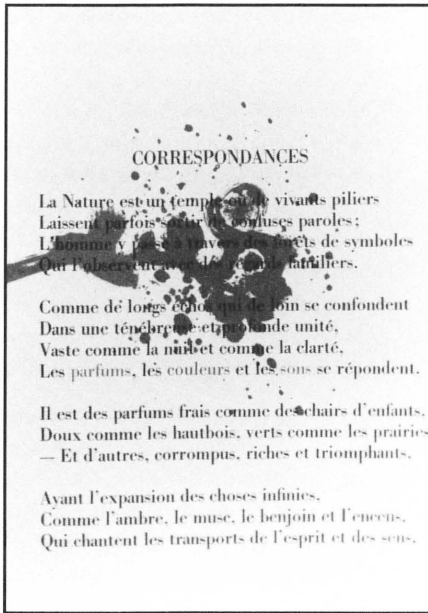


Figure 8

Roger Bezombes,
illustration for "Correspondances"
from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,
Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.
Permission courtesy of the artist.

crosses folds and acts as a graphic link to poems of similar thematics. This connecting device, or crossover, propels the reader/viewer through the volume as it reinforces the visual unity of the ensemble. Passing from the abstract to the figurative, this *écriture* becomes a stem whose flower explodes within the typographical contours of "Correspondances" (see figure 8). Its red pigmentation is echoed in the second stanza's "couleurs," while "parfums" and "sons," tinted blue, remain visually sublimated, felt but almost unseen. In such details, Bezombes refracts the essence of Baudelaire. To illustrate "Les Chats," the artist's *écriture* actually becomes text. The image on the facing leaf invites further typographical games in which collage is used not only for the feline imagery, but also for the characters that compose the poem's title.

Further experimentation surfaces across the four-page sequence for "Les Phares" (see figure 9). Here, privileged words of the poem become petals, as blue and red circles hold them to green stems. Such innovative typographical treatments serve to blur distinctions between verbal and visual components at work in Bezombes' suite. We also note that the name of each *artiste*/*"phare"* is printed in colored ink but that Watteau is the only one circled. This prefigures the collage, dominated by "Gilles," in

which a pair of eighteenth-century, Watteauesque fans coiffe a ghostly female presence—the sole survivor of past “*fêtes galantes*.” What is striking here is the artist’s removal of the entire Watteau stanza from its normal position between Puget and Goya. Now, as a postscript to the poem, it prepares the terrain for Bezombes’ illustration due to an improved proximity to it. More importantly, this newly relocated verse becomes in itself a sort of collage, implicating displacement as it describes new dialectics imposed by the artist upon the text. Habitual approaches to picturing poetry are thus called into question in this, the epitome of radical image-text representation.

As a final example of Bezombes’ experimental verve, we turn to his treatment of “*L’Invitation au voyage*” and “*A une Malabaraise*” (see figure 10). The linkage previously examined in terms of the artist’s *écriture* is drastically amplified here. The illustration itself now constitutes the crossover or propelling device par excellence. Bezombes pairs the poems under their common denominator of exoticism and places them on opposite sides of a double-page illustration whose beginning and ending spill over the folds and onto the typography. This ensemble cannot resist being viewed in its entirety. As such, its six-page sequence becomes a sort of triptych whose central panel

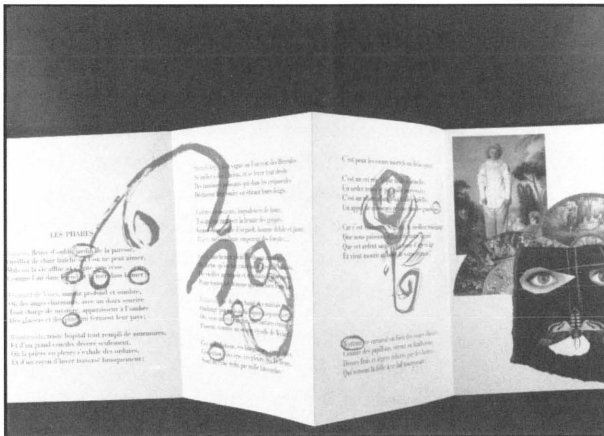


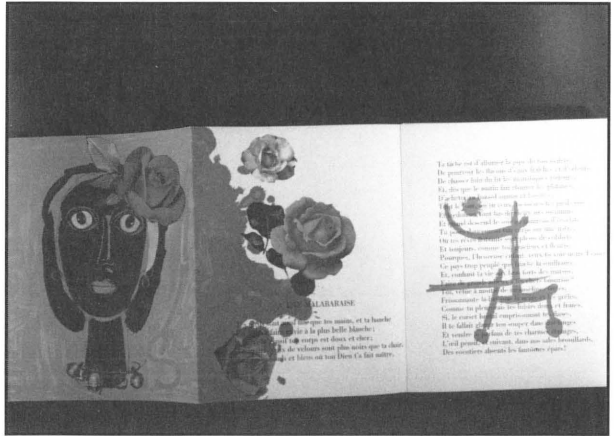
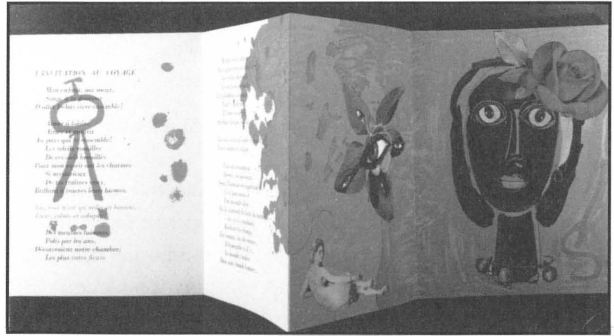
Figure 9

Roger Bezombes,

illustration for “*Les Phares*”

from Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*,
Les Bibliophiles de l’Est, Strasbourg, 1985.

Permission courtesy of the artist.



Figures 10
 Roger Bezombes,
 illustration for "L'Invitation au voyage"
 and "A une Malabaraise" from Baudelaire's
 Les Fleurs du mal,
 Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.
 Permission courtesy of the artist.

animates both of the flanking texts as it shores up the essence of Baudelairian *exotisme*. On the lower left, the pose of Ingres' odalisque portends the "*luxe, calme et volupté*" of the first poem. On the right, the reverie continues as we encounter the Malabaraise of the second poem, who is borrowed from Picasso. Both the female images inhabit the same plane. Both share the common onerous consciousness of the two texts. And the texts, in turn, profit from the heady atmosphere of the illustration. Finally, a blue, multi-eyed flower to the left acts as perhaps the ultimate graphic gesture of Bezombes' suite. Its assim-

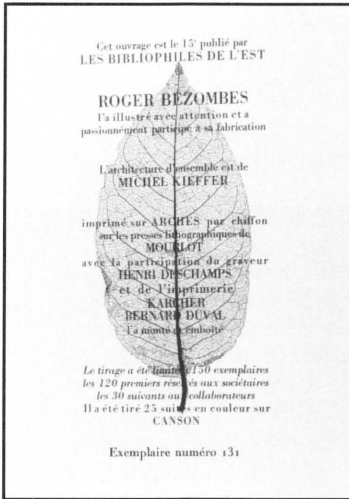


Figure 11

Roger Bezombes,
colophon for Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*,
Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, Strasbourg, 1985.
Permission courtesy of the artist.

ilation of the otherworldly *femme-fleur* at once privileges seeing and equates it with the very *raison d'être* of poetic production.

As a fitting conclusion for this book, Bezombes' colophon (see figure 11) features a leaf whose skeletal appearance is a catalyst for closure on this edition's floral season. If the artist's rich palette draws heavily on Ingres, Miró, Picasso and others, as well as on popular imagery, his last borrowing is taken directly from nature. Neither underpainted, overpainted nor layered, this final collage is the ultimate reduction of the technique to its simplest expression—a coming full circle, in pictorial terms.

Throughout this book, Bezombes seeks to articulate on his visual register the infinite diversity of the text's female-floral configurations. His appropriation of, splicing in, and juxtaposition of often disparate images from ancient to contemporary iconography shows the diversity of the text's potential in terms of inspiration and points to the universality of the Baudelairean *oeuvre*. Abstraction is privileged over representation. Bezombes never promotes a "reading" of the text in absolute or definitive terms; neither does he accept servility to it. Rather, his approach provides a robust visual plane whose intersections with the verbal register foster novel conjugations of perception. In sum, his bouquets never cease to crystallize the *fleur-idéal* and to reframe it within unprecedented paradigms. Above all, this contemporary *livre d'artiste* presents a missing entity in the constellation of illustrated editions for *Les Fleurs du mal*—an entity in which collage and experimental architecture provide new strategies for interpreting Baudelaire's poetic universe.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For further information concerning Baudelaire's illustrators, see the author's "Illustrations for Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*: Symbolist Dreams and Decadent Nightmares," *Symposium*, a special number entitled Baudelaire and His Artists, 30:3, Fall 1984, and "Traumlanschaften anderer Welten," preface to *Blumen des Bosen*, by Charles Baudelaire (Göttingen: Verlag Bert Schlender, 1985).
- ² Roger Bezombes has been active in several artistic domains since the 1940s. Along with book illustration, he has done painting, engraving, posters, medal design, tapestry and stage sets.
- ³ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, illustrated by Roger Bezombes, designed by Michael Kieffer, printed on arches pure chiffon paper and produced on the lithographic presses of Mourlot in a limited edition of 150 copies (Strasbourg: Les Bibliophiles de l'Est, 1985).
- ⁴ Telephone interview with Roger Bezombes, Paris, July 16, 1990.
- ⁵ Telephone interview with Roger Bezombes, Paris, July 16, 1990.