



Nature in the age of its digital production

Françoise Gaillard

Grasses of equally improbable shades of green, blue and red grow on the luminous screen and sway in the gentle breeze.

Their veins, visible against the light with each movement of their leaves, form complex architectural structures. Beginning as fragile sprouts, they gain strength and reach up toward an invisible sky. As long as nothing interrupts their expansion, they multiply and tend to saturate the entire space. They are driven by the will to power of living things that Nietzsche analyzed so well: the will to live with no other finality than self-perpetuation.

The process of their development and decline seems natural, except for the speed. It looks like a film in fast-motion only the cycle appears to have no beginning and no end. We come to realize that we are looking at synthetic nature; that this lush vegetation swaying in the wind is the product of specially created software(1). A plant appears, then disappears without a trace, simply leaving its place to another possibility. To another possible art work, in fact, because the cycle of appearances and disappearances that we found so mimetic of life, reflects the work's opening onto its own potential. What we took for the plant's will to grow is the will of a piece under constant evolutionary pressure.

Each plant has its morphogenetic program but given its sophistication, the computations allow a random factor in its growth. We watch for its reappearance rather than its fading out in vain. It will grow back, or at least its clone will, somewhere on the screen, based on chance written into its germinal programming. Maybe in the place where we lost it. More likely somewhere else. But it will grow back. This "Other Nature"(2), or Super-nature, is the contrary of a still life. It is alive. It is perennial. It is even prolific. And this unpredictable proliferation, though it is skillfully calculated, enchants us because it creates dream-like effects of transparency and overlapping. Nothing to do with the distressing proliferation of invasive plant life. We are not on the verge of chaos due to saturation of the space. We are not faced with imminent vegetal peril. We are in a relationship of joyous immanence with the organic. Miguel Chevalier's piece is as intensely enjoyable as it is introspective. It takes us to a voluptuous and languorous world of artificial paradises(3)... But are not all paradises artificial?

We could almost forget that our wonder is due to the growth or proliferation not of plants but rather of images that give the illusion of it. What delights us is being caught up in the joyously colored round of pixels. We could almost forget that what we see at work is the transition of algorithm into image and not the evolution of something living, from seed to plant, from vegetal DNA to scenes of corn bursting with electric-colored chlorophyll that are born and grow on plasma screens, on veils of tulle or in a plastic bubble. Science has always sought to transform our phenomenological world made up of events, accidents and sensations into models and computations in order to make it intelligible. Modeling has its price. During the operation, imagination, emotion and dreams are lost. With Miguel Chevalier, the intelligible

gets its own back. Calculating reason produces sensitivity and poetry. This engenders the vegetal forms that stimulate dreams and stretch the limits of our imagination.

It may be that these frail artificial forests are not conducive to romantic outpourings. No Olympio(4), if one could be found today, would choose them as confidants of his pain. It is true that they address the senses, particularly visual perception stimulated by their bright colors, rather than sentiment. But they gratify both the child in us, always avid for images, and the adult amazed that such moving fragility is born of numbers and computations.

Miguel Chevalier calls some of his fuchsia-colored efflorescences "Digital Thoughts"(5). There is no better name for this flora of mathematical intelligence, generated by computations rather than digitized images taken from nature. "Digital Thoughts" do not represent the reality that their form evokes. They simulate it, like the scenes of trans-real corn whose morphogenesis simulates a growth pattern borrowed from botany. The reign of synthetic nature is not the reign of simulacra announced by Jean Baudrillard, who remains melancholically attached to the reality it has replaced. It is that of simulation liberated of phenomenal reality. And it is precisely to this liberation that Miguel Chevalier's digital vegetation owes the physical and metaphysical lightness that fascinates and seduces us. It has no ties. It is without roots in physical earth, unanchored in the philosophical sky of ideas. It does not signal to something beneath or beyond the image. Breaking with centuries of theological thought on the icon, its visibility no longer looks to the invisible. If the romantic may see it as offering no consolation, this is because it promises nothing.

Indeed, it promises nothing beyond itself. It makes do with offering only what it is, when it is. Yet this offer is made in abundance, with no holding back. Like the work of art it is merged with, it gives itself over entirely to our pleasure. Everything, immediately. We are in the world of children's senses and the child in us exults before colored screens and their plays on animated transparencies. We are also in the world of the Nietzschean superhuman, delivered of metaphysical concern with meaning. This superhuman, that is only budding within us, takes unabashed pleasure in the fleeting beauty of forms and is moved by their precariousness. Through the poetry of his images, Miguel Chevalier has rendered the indifference of a world reduced to its enchanting, seductive appearance. Nature, revealed by artifice to its non-human truth, has nothing tragic about it here. On the contrary, it is magic and ironically invites us to pass, like Alice, to the other side of the screen, just as it tells us there is nothing there besides what we see. "Digital Thoughts" and "Other Natures" or Super-natures resolutely take art out of the domain of the metaphysical at work in the great Western esthetics as presented by Kant, Hegel and even Adorno. Does the time Miguel Chevalier spent in Japan have anything to do with this distancing? It also puts an end to the requirement that art imitates nature. Baudelaire rose up against the supposedly Aristotelian demand for mimesis. He sang the praises of artifice and dreamed of a paradise that would owe nothing to our disappointing reality. Elsewhere, out of this world Beyond the world which he criticized for being too natural. The connection stops there. Turn of the century Antiphysis translated a philosophical disenchantment with nature, that turned into hatred. Miguel Chevalier's "Super-natures" are the opposite: polychromatic homage to its abundant, joyous wealth.

Whether he physically encloses it in glass and steel constructions, or virtually inserts it in computer programs, it is an act of love. His "Greenhouses"(6) do not let off the pernicious perfume and suffocating morbidity of the decadents. On the contrary, they exude an air of health and elation. The plants dance as if to a Matissian rhythm. Because all this chromatic and rhythmic audacity reminds us of Matisse's "Dance" and paper cutouts. Monet too. Monet and his "Water Lilies". And of Warhol's serial variations on flowers. Yet despite certain formal or conceptual analogies, the creative process of "Other Natures" makes a radical break with the history of art, that nonetheless makes its presence felt.

Gilles Deleuze said of the organic that it was life in forms. It is enough to add: "and in colors", to understand why Miguel Chevalier's analysis of the mutation of forms has found inspiration in the modeling of the world of plants.

1 software Musi2eye

2 Generic title that Miguel Chevalier uses to cover his works produced and exhibited since 1992.

3 Artificial Paradises, 1994

4 "Air plays with the branch when I cry" in "The Melancholy of Olympio", Victor Hugo

5 Digital Thoughts, 1997

6 Greenhouse Effect, 1986