

The network as an art form

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Miguel Chevalier explores the network of transient interconnections that permeate and regulate our modern world. As he suggests in his artwork, *Inhabiting Networks* (2000), whether we like it or not, we live in a networked world. From the light-emitting diodes of *Inhabiting Networks*, the artificial paradises of *Sur-Nature* (2004) - a digital flower garden created for the Oslo metro - through to *Metapolis* (2002), a virtual city created in Monterrey, Miguel Chevalier is constantly finding new ways to express the essence of existence. Neither simulacra nor simulation, his virtual aesthetic transforms everything in its path, thereby elevating the network into an art form, or a kind of poetry of trajectories.

In *Mise en Réseaux* (2005), a commission for the Paris art gallery Odéon°5, Miguel Chevalier has created a dialogue between two radically different approaches to virtual art. On the one hand, *Mise en Réseaux* is a gigantic sculpture suspended from a lattice-like grid; a three-dimensional web composed of 4,000 steel fragments, illuminated in fluorescent colours. Emerging from the obscurity like a shaft of light, it appears ethereal and weightless. As we contemplate this structured labyrinth, we are reminded of the glass and steel towers that dominate the post-modern skyline, with their shimmering superstructures and in-between layers of transparent light. This is because *Mise en Réseaux* has been conceived as a journey and has a cadence and radiant energy of its own.

On the other hand, as a sculpture, *Mise en Réseaux* is physically "real", and this something of a new departure for Miguel Chevalier. Yet paradoxically, it is almost a mirror image of the VR installation which is being projected by computer in the next room. Furthermore, its structure allows the spectator to create and recreate the work of art. Thus, as a virtual installation that gives a new perspective to the invisible, quite different to that offered by traditional media. Although it is piloted by AAASeed, a software developed by Emmanuel Berriet, *Mise en Réseaux* relies upon interaction with the spectator for its existence. A permanent flux, its ephemeral shapes coalesce and reform into a seemingly infinite array of cloud-like formations that echo the "liquid architectures" of Marcos Novak. The structure takes shape and proliferates until it self-destructs and reappears in a different guise. The form is in a continual state of becoming, a work in progress which inhabits and explores its environment through a myriad of lines and interconnecting trajectories. *Mise en Réseaux* uses the fractal as its point of departure. Like a fern, a frost flower, coastlines or a Brownian movement, the fractal is self-replicating. The fractal is a geometric description which orders each element and creates infinite repetition, or worlds within worlds. By using fractal schemata, the artist can bring to life a universe of spirals, bifurcations, turbulence and randomness. This "formal chaos", as envisioned by Paul Klee, becomes immediately apparent as the spectator interacts with the work. The lines oscillate and mutate into a macrocosm of spatio-temporal constellations, forming abstract landscapes.

Virtual or physical artwork? Imaginary space or actual space? When we look into Chevalier's two-sided mirror, the same questions are always being asked. How do we make something complex from something simple? What process or medium will allow us to blend space and time in such a way as to create a lasting visual impression? Indeed, Miguel Chevalier's vision of the network as an artform is not confined to technology. Just as Moholy-Nagy dreamt of "painting with light" and even imagined using clouds as a canvas, here, the objective is to intertwine the natural cosmos with the urban cosmos. By working in at the level of the microcosm, Chevalier has found a way to invent immense architectural sculptures. The movement of the 4,000 steel micro-elements of *Mise en Réseau* creates an infinite loop, much like an interactive fractal generator. Miguel Chevalier intends to develop this approach further with *Fractal Cloud* (2007), his current work-in-progress, a commission for a site in the dockland area of Marseille. Conceived as a "tree of light" rising 20 metres in height, *Fractal Cloud* symbolises the passage of time as it relates to science, astronomy and the urban space. A kind of public clock for the twenty-first century, *Fractal Cloud* will modify the landscape of the city and enrich the lives of passers-by.

For Miguel Chevalier, the network must be understood in all its facets. In a globalised world, we inhabit the space between "here" and "there". We have created virtual and transparent spaces with their blurry rush of images. However, if virtual art is inherently enabled by technology, it also built upon philosophical and artistic foundations. Virtual art is concerned with the vitality of forms, the dynamics between "there is" and "there is not", the interval between appearance and disappearance. The virtual state is a philosophy of becoming which straddles order and chaos, stability and flux. It reveals the infinity inherent in our environment, whether in a flower or a blade of grass.

These are just some of the impressions that Miguel Chevalier's network art inspires; an aesthetic of ephemeral, complex shapes, both dynamic and static. Its transience is not melancholic, rather it is imbued with the ephemera of the present moment*.

* The concept of positive, non-melancholic transience is discussed in detail in my book, *Esthétique de l'éphémère* (Ed. Galilée - 2003)