



Miguel Chevalier - A feast for the eyes at the crossroads of art, science, and technique, Edmond Couchot, 2008

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I met Miguel Chevalier in 1984. He was returning from the United States, where, after graduating from the French national institutes of fine arts and decorative arts in Paris, he had gone on a study scholarship to continue his training at the Pratt Institute and the School of Visual Arts in New York. His time there had acquainted him with the digital technologies that were beginning to penetrate the art world, and whose immense potential was not lost on him. Upon returning, however, he could not find a comparable place to work: art schools in France, resistant to adopting techniques that all but a few teachers judged unsuitable for artistic production, did not offer the right equipment. The places that did have it (at the time this consisted of electronic palettes mostly intended for television) refused to take him in on the grounds that he was not trained in the proper techniques. Miguel managed nonetheless to convince a CNRS optics research laboratory to give him computer access for a few hours a night. Naturally he would have preferred to work in better conditions, or at least normal ones.

This was why he sought me out—as did Jeffrey Shaw, who around the same time was also looking a hospitable environment in which to work. With some colleagues at the University of Paris VIII, I had recently created the first program in France to offer art students (and sometimes science students) the opportunity to use computers with image-making software designed by teachers in order to facilitate artistic work. At the time, of course, such software was particularly rare, and the computers particularly difficult to use—a far cry from the polished programs we use today.

Unfortunately I could not say yes to Miguel, as our department had very little equipment, which was intended for our students only and was already widely overused. Miguel would have had to enroll as a student and take all the classes in our program, which, given his excellent credentials from the best schools, hardly suited him. The challenges faced by this young artist, anecdotal though they may seem, bear a moment's pause, for they are typical of the situation of anyone who wished to learn and explore this technology—just like those artists in the nineteenth century who wished to become proficient in photography or, more recently, those interested by video. It is curious that, even in light of the fate of photography, initially condemned as a non-art—Delacroix claimed that it could be only a copy of the real, false by dint of its exactness—most art historians and aestheticians a century later harbor the same distrust toward the digital image. (Granted, photography has only been recognized as its own complete art form relatively recently, as has video.) Thus it was into a hostile cultural climate, if not an indifferent one, that digital art was born in France. As for equipment, Miguel's situation only began to improve with the advent of the Amiga—the first personal computer, relatively accessible and endowed with simple imaging software—in 1986. Believing in it was

still a leap of faith, given the poor quality of the results; despite its limits, though, the technology offered glimpses of a promising future.

Though I regretted being unable to offer Miguel the reception and resources he sought, I was nonetheless pleased to discover during his visit an enthusiastic creator, effervescent with ideas and confident in his intuition, and I have paid him particular attention since. Miguel had understood all the innovation that these “new” technologies—they were new in the 1980s, yet we continue to qualify them as such—were poised to bring to graphic art and art in general, and would soon provide a brilliant illustration. Thus I have followed his evolution for almost 24 years.

Early influences

The situation has changed considerably in the last twenty years, at least where art and technique are concerned. Miguel Chevalier now has an estimable body of work behind him, and a first publication (*Miguel Chevalier*, Flammarion, 2000) has already presented his investigations and installations from his earliest work through the year 2000. More than eight years later, the number of his works has increased notably, and a new publication has become necessary to reflect what he has accomplished since then.

The works have followed one another naturally, much in the way a tree grows: from the same trunk several branches have arisen—that is, different themes of research, linked to increasingly powerful techniques—which have themselves borne the fruit of original work. There was no definitive break, then, between the end of the 1990s and the years that followed: we find the same central themes, only in fuller bloom. As for the evolution of the technical aspect of Miguel's work, it is important to note a major influence during that period: the creation of la Fabrika, an extremely well equipped and independent studio in Ivry-sur-Seine. This studio put high-tech equipment at Miguel's disposal and allowed him to collaborate closely with various specialists, particularly in computing, with whom he developed his own software. It also afforded him the chance to experiment with the potentialities of technique, to refine his projects in their actual proportions—their literal grandeur—the same way artists once used studies and sketches. The studio takes up an ancient entrepreneurial tradition, stretching from Giotto to Warhol by way of Courbet, of putting the artist in contact not only with the world of art and its mediators, but also with those of research and industry.

Miguel's work and biography are well enough known by now that I will not insist upon the manner in which the tree took root (to return to the vegetal metaphor). We know how much the visual and intellectual culture of Latin America marked him—he was born in Mexico—as well as its luxuriant flora and the grand frescoes of mural painters like Siqueiros, Tamayo and Rivera. But perhaps I should mention, as Miguel has to me, the spirit of community, and those massive colorful festivals like the Day of the Dead, an ancient ritual that shares in its Aztec and Catholic origins both jubilation and tragedy. Miguel's desire to draw his spectators into exuberant feasts where everyone participates and revels freely no doubt has its origins here.

I will also underline a few decisive points, like the time he spent during his early adolescence in Spain, where his father was director of la Casa Velazquez—the Spanish equivalent of the Villa Médicis—and where he discovered the great Spanish painters: Goya in particular, with his bold and luminous palette, and a contemporary artist, Carlos Cruz-Diez, who treated colors as chromatic events to be lived viscerally by the viewer and varying according to his distance from the work. Moreover, the chromatic elements at play in Cruz-Diez's *Physichromies*, fine colored strips in close parallel disposition, were mechanically prepared in advance and precisely catalogued—a first approach to the decomposition and recomposition of colors based on discrete elements that would later be digitized by computer treatment.

After Spain, Miguel returned to France and discovered artists who belonged to the same movement as Cruz-Diez: Agam, Vasarely, Nicolas Schöffer, Jesús Rafael Soto, and many others. One work by Soto made a particularly strong impression: a *Penetrable*, a sort of vast sculpture inside which the spectator could move the elements—flexible stalks suspended in space—around at will. All of these artists were passionate about the physiological phenomena proper to visual and tactile perception. They sought to elicit unsettling optical and kinesthetic sensations by obliging the viewer to shift his attention, to move in front of, around, or inside their artistic apparatuses. The identity of the work such as the viewer ultimately perceived it was thereby afflicted with a certain instability.

The work was thus animated by an artificial life, fluid and haphazard. It is this kind of changing identity, more physical than conceptual—this capacity of the work to come to new life under different conditions in its visual and corporal relation to the viewer—that we find behind the preoccupations of digital artists, and of Miguel in particular. These years, 1960 to 1970, also saw the expansion of computer science and the technologies that depended on it. If the advent of the computer allowed a return, with more sophisticated means, to the same ideas sounded by Gustave Guillaume's *cinétisme*, the digital revolution would reach far beyond the domain of art, extending to nearly all human activities and provoking, culturally as much as industrially or economically or in communications, radical changes in the fabric of the world.

From the line to the pixel

So Miguel decided to become an artist. This only partially pleased his parents, but a compromise was made and the young artist-to-be, whose technical agility and design sensibility had already been noted favorably, entered the industrial design section of the *École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs*. He did not remain there long, however, quickly undertaking a series of studies in various programs that further redoubled his artistic and technical knowledge. I leave the reader to refer to his biography to learn more; let us remark only that he began to exhibit his work in 1984, and that since then he has not ceased to produce in astonishing abundance. He has been awarded several international prizes, giving him occasion to travel (the United States, Japan, and once again to Latin America, where he would give conferences as well), and taught in various art schools in France (although without the advantage of the official title of *enseignant*).

After abandoning painting and serigraphy, Miguel used his inquiries in video to pass from the analog line and its attendant aesthetic to the pixel—the smallest directly manipulable element of the image. The computerized image-matrix was not the video image: you no longer interacted with the line but with the point. Each point was accessed with mathematical precision, each point was calculable; you altered it exactly where you wished on the screen and assigned it the desired color—from a fairly meager palette at first, although with the development of computers the choice grew to over sixteen million tones. The consequences were unprecedented. They entailed on one hand the need to conceive increasingly sophisticated programs, and thus a closer relationship to science and technology, and on the other the possibility for the author—and ultimately the viewer—to take part in this calculus as it unfolded inside the machine.

It is this second characteristic of digital technology that we will examine first in regard to Miguel's works. To place them in the historical context of art and technique so that we may better grasp their meaning, I will point out that the concern for making the viewer interact with the image could be accomplished by essentially optical means, as the artists of the *luminocinétique* movement managed to do, while other creators had been using electronic techniques since the end of the sixties—which shows, incidentally, that this desire for participation was shared by numerous artistic movements, and indeed constituted a societal

phenomenon. We can trace the first interactive electronic works to this era: in 1969, Myron Krueger used circuits and electronic sensors to create a sound and light environment that reacted to the movements of the audience. But it was not until the appearance of microtechnology, which rendered computers more technically accessible and relatively inexpensive, that these interactive artistic propositions began to multiply.

This interactive quality was without precedent in the history of the image. Photography had widely automated the fabrication of the image, from composition to printing; cinema had allowed movement to be recorded; television had added the nearly instantaneous transmission of the image—but in none of these cases did the spectator have the chance to intervene on the image in real time, without a perceptible delay. This was a totally new and unlimited horizon opening itself to creation and imagination—whence, in some, a certain attitude of hesitation, if not fright, and in others one of excitement and impatient curiosity. Naturally, this radical change in the fabrication, transmission and reception of the image did not fail to pose numerous questions—as much artistic as aesthetic and social—which stirred impassioned debates then and continue to do so today.

When action commands vision

First and foremost, the question of demonstration method and image support. Large-format interactive installations initially required a certain autonomy in regard to the space in which they were presented: relative dimness, because of the limited brightness of video screens and projectors; a space both partially closed, to isolate the image and its audience from the outside environment, and often protected from ambient noises, particularly when the production involved sound or music. Such constraints made the exposition resemble the darkened quarters of the cinema, even though here were images stripped of any cinematographic quality, and the spectator was not seated but rather encouraged to move and act. Far from being an obstacle, these constraints, if handled well, conditioned the optimal reception of the work and contributed to its style. There is no art without constraint. Miguel Chevalier realized several installations of this kind, mostly before the end of the 1990s.

In *Le Grand Verre/Liquid Nature* (1996), a nod to Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, the spectator—whom we should perhaps call the interactor instead—alters the image by covering a photoelectric cell with his hand. This triggers the liquefaction of the image, as though the hand is giving the eyes the power of dissolution. In *Fractal Cloud* (2000), the interactor provokes in a similar way a three-dimensional cloud generated from a network of fractal lines, viewed from the interior. Again the hand controls the eye's course through the image. In many other installations, the interface is a simple computer mouse. The link to the image thus implies a direct, dynamic relation, all the more intimate when the image appears on a computer monitor or a small screen between the mouse and the hand: all the spectator's attention is concentrated on the fingers (particularly the index), the palm and the forearm. The action commands the vision.

In situ

Miguel Chevalier has explored other paths as well. His installations tend to occupy more and more space, to take on monumental proportions. The increased power of the video projector now allows luminous projections and great enlargements, capable of covering, for instance, entire facades of buildings, such as that of the LCL building in Paris—*Supernatures* (2007)—where giant flowers several stories high bent down toward the sidewalk as though attracted by the pedestrians' own motions. Seen at night from the opposite sidewalk, these virtual flowers mixed harmoniously with the silhouettes of the trees bordering the Champs-

Elysées. Another piece, among many of this kind, is *Corded Structures* (2003), in which images representing contour lines and relief maps of the Corsican Patrimonio region were projected onto buildings at the Orenge de Gaffory domain at nightfall: a phantasmagorical spectacle prolonged by the starry sky of the Corsican night.

We traditionally use *in situ* to refer to installations created specially to inhabit a place with a preexisting identity. Many artists are content to add a more or less artificial veneer to an element already present in the site, making it into a simple exhibition space and stripping it of its character. Miguel's approach is different: he strives to integrate the piece not only into the particular space and the history of the surroundings, but to the culture it occupies as well. Take, among others, his project in progress for the Place Jamaa El Fna in Marrakech, which will consist of floating above the square illuminated flying carpets and spheres decorated with multicolored arabesques. To integrate these unexpected objects into the historical environment, respecting at once its architecture and the culture of a city rich with history, Miguel attempted to recreate the magical atmosphere of the *1,001 Arabian Nights*, taking inspiration from the geometric model of the arabesque. Introducing works *in situ* compels the artist to get to know the place, to respect its cultural atmosphere without sacrificing his own originality; he must come not as an occupant but as a servant. The monumental projections can take up residence in an open setting, on the exteriors of buildings, and at the same time instill a sort of closed environment. The spectator finds himself totally immersed in the recreated space, drawn to the center of a completely virtual universe that isolates him from the familiar elements of the outside world. This was the case of an impressive installation, *Intersecting Networks*, mounted in 2003 for the Nuit Blanche festival in the Bourse de Paris (the former stock exchange). Spectators came into the interior of a dynamic and circular virtual universe, forty meters in diameter, with images projected on the floor representing the exchange of information between the planet's major markets. This lavish, immersive installation—not interactive, as it happens—takes its place in the popular nineteenth-century tradition of panoramic views, participating with the same scopic desire to visually embrace all surroundings as far as the horizon. Here, however, the visible elements no longer belong to a natural landscape, but to an increasingly permanent virtual one beyond our control.

Although Miguel has shown an increasingly marked predilection for giant-format work, he can play in more modest dimensions too. The recent evolution of flat plasma screens, which have increased in size and diminished significantly in thickness, has permitted him to situate his works in frames resembling those of a traditional painting or photograph, easily hung on the walls of a room. Thanks to an integrated miniature camera, these productions still allow the spectator to interact with the displayed image—for example, vividly colored imaginary flowers bow toward his passage in front of the tableau, as though blown by the air he has displaced.

Interactivity: a new relationship to the piece

If interactivity has become characteristic of computers, it was not always so. Between the introduction of readable data in the form of punch cards or magnetic ribbons (the “conversational console,” the marriage of keyboard and screen, did not exist yet) and the calculations expressed only in digits and symbols, it was necessary to wait hours, sometimes days. An immediate response from a computer was unthinkable. Great progress came when dialogue between the computer and its operator became possible thanks to an improvement in processing speed, new programs and new devices—interfaces—capable of introducing into the computer, without slowing its calculations, not only alphanumeric data but all manner of other information: gestures, movements, speed or acceleration of objects (including the human body), environmental and fixed images, sound and music, and so on. Meanwhile, the

computer returned its results in the form of static or mobile images, text, sound, mechanical movements, and other actions.

Another question raised by the relationship between spectator and work vis-à-vis the interactive situation concerned the body. The first synthetic images made automatically—that is, without human intervention—were criticized as immaterial and detached from the corporeal presence of the artist, which in turn led to the fatal conclusion that they were not *art*. The criticism was the same one that had been leveled at photography. True, at the beginning of the sixties, when the first attempts at computer art appeared, the results were particularly paltry: perforated cards instead of a screen, printers that printed only typographic characters without nuance or color. But fixed on paper these minimalist rough drafts were no less material than traditional drawings; some even offered a relatively convincing impression of being made by the human hand, with all its tremors and remorse. The situation changed slowly as the available interfaces were diversified and improved, resulting in an increasingly pointed consideration of the spectator's own bodily capabilities. At present, the dialogue between the interactor and the computer, or more precisely between the interactor and the images, texts and sounds the computer produces, is considerably richer, and the choice of interface contributes greatly to the aesthetic of each work.

Some artists, including those who work with networks, privilege the intimate rapport allowed by the keyboard and mouse opposite the small PC screen. Others prefer to free themselves from the screen and mouse in order to engage the body more. Miguel is one of the latter, but for him bodily engagement is not enough: he seeks an intuitive and spontaneous relationship between the interactor and the computer. The interactor must have the impression that he has mastered his movement, that he may follow its effects on the image (or perhaps on the text and the sound). If this does not happen—as it does not in too many cases—the spectator remains disconcerted before the effects he is supposedly producing. He gestures in vain; the meaning of the production escapes him. This is not to say that the intuitive relationship exempts him from the duty to try to understand his own action, to experiment with transgression, to prove his intelligence and sensitivity—in short, to manifest a certain talent.

Art and play

Understanding—and appreciating—works of art always engages not just emotion, but a profound cultural aptitude, an education, as well. Just as the lover of painting learns to love it better by moving past her first impressions, so the interactor must initiate himself in these new practices that are beginning to constitute an authentic culture. Miguel's performance occupies the particular state wherein the spectator is drawn in partly by the free play of spontaneous pleasure and partly by the more intellectual desire to explore the potentialities of the work, to grasp its meaning and place it in an artistic context. His works have a pedagogic dimension, because they make the interactor rediscover his own corporeality in relation to the image by placing him in unusual postures. For example, an overlook from a mezzanine, as in *Growth and Mutations* (1998), where he could choose between four interfaces—a potentiometer that allowed him to act in real time along with music by Atau Tanaka; a telescope that, when manipulated, granted access to thirteen different visual universes; a small industrial press that distorted images; a steam iron that zoomed in on them. Or a vantage immediately above the images projected on the ground—the “carpets” present in numerous installations—which transformed beneath the steps of the spectator. Alongside this pedagogic dimension is a ludic one; yet it is difficult to clearly distinguish the two, for the latter does not reduce the work to simple play.

Certain critics have reproached this quality in interactive art. Despite their clear relation, however, there is a fundamental difference between art and recreation. A game puts the player

in external contact, whether he seeks to defeat his partners (competition) or seduce them by a trick of identity (avatars and role-playing games), or whether he seeks simply to master himself (games of risk, which imperil his self-control, or games of chance, where he competes with an unpredictable external force). A work of art may borrow from any of these ludic categories, but where the artist seeks primarily to affirm his *presence*, his singularity—even when he claims not to contaminate it with his subjectivity—the author of a game does not try to manifest himself, does not take part.

Every work is inhabited by the presence of the author at the moment of creation. And it is this signature presence, with its style, its formal or fictional imagination, its universe and its symbolic vision of the world, that the spectator intuitively finds. He will walk after Miguel on the same flowered carpets, perform the same gestures in front of the same image, revisit the same moments of joy, interrogation, discomposure and exaltation—he will experience the same sensations, or at least neighboring ones. Behind the powerful machinery of digital technology, beyond automatic calculation and interface and real-time interaction, is the singular presence of Miguel Chevalier, displaying and imposing himself.

The digital: between science and technique

In the interactive medium, the relationship between the work and its audience has two aspects. It can be singular, engaging just one person, or plural, drawing in a relatively large number of interactors. Miguel practices both, but he has found that when the audience intervenes *en masse*—for example along the corridors of the metro in Oslo (*Ultra-Nature*, 2004), on whose walls were projected images of flowers reacting to the passage of the pedestrians—the effects obtained by chance combinations of crowd movements reveal unanticipated facets of the work. Similarly, in Eindhoven, pedestrians walked along an immense carpet of flowers that reacted to their motions. Each passerby could watch the flowers open beneath his footsteps, while others, nearby or farther away, produced the same effects. All of this passed as if a secret communication, an unspoken complicity, had been established between the passersby. The flowered carpet transported them into the same imaginary and unusual world by removing them, for a moment, from the banality of the everyday.

These new forms of presentation and the new interrelations that the works weave among their spectators are only possible because their technology breaks with traditional techniques. The digital instates a different connection to science and to technology; this is what constitutes the other major characteristic of digital art. Let us first note that it is difficult to precisely distinguish technique from pure science in the artistic domain. To make a historical digression only as far back as the Renaissance, we see that the refinement of central perspective projection was answerable both to geometry (base elevation, construction of the vanishing point) and to the mechanical techniques of optical projection (from Alberti's intersector to multiple perspectographs). We must also note the new media, invented by the Van Eyck brothers, which allowed for transparency and glaze, techniques obtained more by artisanal tinkering than by the knowledge of chemistry, which did not even exist as a science yet. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, pushed by realist demands on the figuration of the body, art took its inspiration from anatomy, leading to molding, ceroplasty, and even dissection.

In the following century, Turner used Goethe's theories explicitly in painting *Light and Color* (1843). Photographic painters became specialized in optics and chemistry. Impressionists and neo-impressionists after Delacroix, still preoccupied with color theory, made reference to the works of Chevreul, Blanc, Rood, Helmholtz and Charles Henry. Meanwhile, Odilon Redon read Darwin attentively, using the theory of the evolution of species in the 1893 lithograph series *Origins*; Redon in turn influenced Gauguin and the entire symbolist

generation. Some years later, art nouveau painters would refer to the works of German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, *Art Forms of Nature*, which renewed Darwin's ideas and evolutionary models.

After the cubist revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century, painters turned toward mathematics in order to replace Euclidean geometry and the dated notions of perspective with other geometries such as Riemann's and Lobatchevsky's. Gleizes, Duchamp and Metzinger read Henri Poincaré's *Science and Hypothesis*; Duchamp, rather impressed by Gaston de Pawlowski's *Voyage to the Land of the Fourth Dimension*, which popularized mathematical theories of space, made his *Bride Stripped Bare (Le Grand Verre)*. Surrealism, for its part, took inspiration from psychoanalysis, even adopting some of its techniques. During the second half of the century, references to science continued to diversify: artists have taken up the laws of optics and the physiology of perception, as well as sociology and structural linguistics, while digital and cybernetic technologies have continued to arise.

With the digital medium, though, science penetrates directly to the heart of the computer. The models borrowed from science provide the basic equipment for the software. There are thus two different approaches for the artist: some look to computer science for tools to master, and go no further—although this restraint does not prevent them from producing original works that often bear a connection to traditional techniques. Others attempt to delve deeper into the craft, studying the very scientific models used in programming and adapting them to an artistic project, or inventing others with (or without) the aid of a specialist. This is the path chosen by Miguel. He finds in computer science not only the means he needs, but also a source of inspiration that stimulates his aesthetic. There is a structural and formal equanimity between the world of networks and digital communication interpreted by Miguel, for instance, and the techniques he uses to bestow a sensitive form on this invisible world. The real world and the art world operate on the same technology.

Space and growth

I have found in Miguel's work two major themes: space and growth. The space in which his works are inscribed, or indeed the space created by them, sometimes recalls the natural, with his flora and his realist or imaginary landscapes, sometimes the urban, with his real or virtual cities, sometimes the informational universe of electronic networks, and sometimes material structures giving form to architectural sculpture. Articulated through this space, the theme of growth returns us to the living world: not only the vegetal one of all his *Super, Second, Ultra* or *Other Natures*, but also a world no longer natural, a world constructed by man, the admirable or fearsome product of his technique and culture; the world of artifacts and objects, or better yet of symbols, abstractions, writings, sounds. These themes interlace often—for growth creates space, and space growth—and have become more complex and more confident since the turn of the century.

I have discussed the attention Miguel pays to his *in situ* works, in which he strives to integrate his productions without disturbing the environment that anchors them. But he takes a different approach to space in works where his liberty is unlimited. Here he has recourse to many kinds of computerized models. Fractals, for instance, can create non-Euclidean spaces with incomplete dimensions, all the while generating forms both recurring and constantly renewed. Though new, these models join the aesthetic preoccupations of the artists early in this century in searching for a meta-dimension addressed toward perceptive faculties besides vision, and revive the same spirit of imagination. Fractals also enjoy an automatic and inexhaustible morphological power: these models may produce bizarre spaces or, on the contrary, serve to render mountains or clouds more realistically.

In one of Miguel's most recent works, *RGB Land* (2006), the spectator is engaged in an aerial voyage over a landscape, projected on an immense panoramic screen, which might be

that of the earth before life appeared, colored only in variations of red, green and blue. This telluric landscape, stripped of all life and vegetation, where the water of lakes, seas and clouds offers the only specter of life, has the capacity (thanks again to fractal algorithms) to regenerate itself continuously, to offer to the viewer a perpetually different landscape. The traveler never returns to the same place, not because the itinerary has changed but because the places are never the same—although the original map on which the relief figures are constructed remains identical. Confronted with this universe in constant autotransformation and without memory, the spectator is overtaken with both a certain anguish and a certain pleasure.

The same methods can also produce artificial flowers, as in *Fractal Flowers* (2008). These flowers, which recall those of the various *Natures*, are realized with geometric elements in three simple dimensions. They react to the movements and gestures of the spectator, just as heliotropic flowers react to the sun: bending toward him when he approaches, or inclining to the right or the left as he moves one way or the other, as if they are observing him. After a time they fade, die and disappear, leaving other flowers to sprout, grow and die in their place. So goes the cycle of life, for flowers as for us.

Other digital models, taken notably from biology (genetic algorithms), produce effects of growth, multiplication, and disappearance, all creating a slightly different aesthetic with more fluid and less geometric forms. On the whole, though, these models are based on the ability to function independently and to self-generate indefinitely. They can just as well apply to natural objects, flora and fauna and terrains and clouds, as to artificial ones, architectures and cities and monuments and sculptures, or even virtual objects, digital networks and the data coursing through them. Miguel shares this predilection for autogenerating models with a number of other artists, not only graphic creators but also musicians and writers or poets.

In the lovely *Flight of the Mail* (2008), realized in collaboration with composer Jacopo Baboni-Schilingi, the spectator faces a large screen on which a jumble of letters, postcards and packages of all sizes is projected. As soon as he moves on an interactive carpet, he provokes the flight and dispersal of these objects, while a crescendo of musical sonorities evokes the beating of wings. In reality this is the sound of the automatic sorting mechanisms used in a postal center, manipulated by the composer. Then, once he steps off the carpet, the objects gently fall back to earth and the music calms down. The participant acts directly on the movement of objects in space, and on certain parameters of the music (whose composition is also inspired by generative models).

In another piece, *Metapolis* (2003), the spectator is immersed in a 400-square meter interactive environment, where two-dimensional images of the town of Monterrey, Mexico mix with three-dimensional synthetic images, evoking an imaginary virtual city carried away in an anarchistic growth. The spectator's tour through the city is also accompanied by music by Baboni-Schilingi and by texts in three languages, among which he can select at will (without being able to alter them). This part of the program, contributed by Jean-Pierre Balpe, calls to mind linguistic generative models. In all of these productions the interactor's real-time intrusion into the process can be finely measured out. The author of the piece has the liberty to limit or increase the effects of the spectator's participation, and to disrupt the automatic and endless production of these life forms with a simple gesture, thereby regulating or reorienting the function of the system.

Gestalt and *Gestaltung*

The use of these techniques requires the assistance of specialists. This is a delicate point, for it is necessary to establish a proper understanding of the objectives between the artist and his collaborator. The latter must put his skills to the service of those objectives; in return, it is desirable that the artist know precisely what he can and cannot require from the technician,

for which he himself needs a certain knowledge of the technique. While Miguel is attentive to the technological evolution of the tools and the perspectives they permit, he is not one to run headlong after the latest innovation: he takes his time, experiments—experimentation being decisive in this domain—and only adopts new means when they justify themselves fully. This precaution confers upon his work a decidedly enduring quality. If the computers he was using twenty years ago are now obsolete, the works he made with them have lost none of their freshness. A habit developed alongside abstract painting of classifying painters according to the way they respected (or did not respect) the mimetic tradition. Some devoted themselves to “representing” the phenomenal aspect of things, their exterior form, nonetheless filtering them through the framework of personal interpretation; others expressed an interior and abstract reality, expressive or geometric, non-figurative by design. In Miguel's work we find both tendencies, often intimately combined, but associated anew by the materialization of the image, the materiality of the movement—be that movement autonomous or induced by the spectator. This approach renews that of Paul Klee, who no longer sought to represent form—Gestalt—but the formation of form—*Gestaltung*—thus adding time to space, becoming to immobility.

These images may evoke precise and realistic forms (objects, flowers, cities, landscapes) or non-figurative ones (“corded” volumes, pixelizations, point networks, geometric and knotted lines, digits and letters unfurling in space). But they are always characterized by precision in design: an intensity and richness of hue, a subtlety of halftones, the contrast of lights and shadows, flat tints and reliefs, the sensation of depth—a permanent feast for the eyes.

Still, Miguel is not only an imagist. He is also an architect-sculptor who takes on monumental projects, not virtual but solid and material. *Ribbons of Life* is a composite-material sculpture (using corian, a synthetic thermosetting resin) a dozen meters high, suspended from the ceiling of a vast auditorium in the ocean liner *Liberty of the Seas*. The forms of this sculpture, inspired by algae, sway gently with the movements of the boat, and serve as background for the projection of moving synthetic images, giving them the appearance of aquatic life. Another work of the same type, still in progress, *Trees, Coral, Fractals* (2006) is composed of four giant tree-shaped sculptures, to be installed in a public plaza in Marseilles. These trees have no leaves, but the tips of their branches release clouds of steam, which at night boast colors of a variation and intensity determined by pedestrian and automobile traffic. In another version of the same project, *Fractal Tensegrity Network* (2007), Miguel used reticulated metallic structures, hung from cables, which can be assembled infinitely in several layers, allowing the construction of astonishing metallic clouds suspended from thin pylons overhead.

In *Gesture and Speech*, André Leroi-Gourhan wrote: “The human act *par excellence* is perhaps not so much the creation of tools as the domestication of time and space.” In offering us a view of the world as an infinite landscape to explore and remodel, Miguel Chevalier domesticates time and space in his own way. His work puts us in the presence of a luxuriant and colorful form of life, a hybrid of nature and artifice, pure pleasure to the eyes. But life does not exist without its opposite—without senescence and decay. He shows us also, behind the joyful exuberance and seduction of the images, worlds in perpetual transformation whose turbulence can take us to the point of vertigo. Amid the euphoria of the senses, there often emerges a hint of the tragic. A reminiscence, no doubt, of the sacred rituals of the Day of the Dead.