Miguel Chevalier - Nature and Artifice
Gunnar B. Kvaran, 2008

Depictions of movement and time have preoccupied artists since the prehistoric period. The invention of narrative structures in order to represent temporal situations resides at the core of art-making and enables artists, quite simply, to tell their story. From linear progressions to the presentation of complex constellations of forms and figures in spatial orders, such structures have evolved remarkably from one art-historical moment to the next.

The appearance of film marks one of the most radical breaks in this history of the representation of movement and time. What had formerly only been articulated in a language of signs and symbols could now be captured and 'realistically' represented on the screen. At a more abstract level, even though time tends to be reconstructed in films, one has the impression that the artists can film time itself, especially when engaging with so-called 'life time'. Crucially, film enables the possibility of review (rewinding, rewatching) that emphasizes its fundamental difference with 'real time.'

Time is also related to light, another of the visual arts' most rudimentary subjects of engagement. Natural light – sunlight – has long preoccupied artists and is commonly grappled with in terms of its relation to architecture and sculpture, and in an effort to create a sense of drama and transcendence. The architects of the pyramids, for example, were deeply attuned to their great structures' relationship with light, as were the artisans who designed medieval Gothic cathedrals and the Baroque artists who applied light in spectacularly effective ways in their sculptures and stained-glass work. During these varied historical periods, artists were already utilizing light as a means to dissolve time and place and to create ephemeral, supernatural portals to the hereafter.

Modernism, whose origins date from the mid-1800s, was a rational movement, with more or less robust connections to scientific and technological inventions. Following on the Impressionists' attempt to capture the fleeting instant – the transitory impact of light at particular moments in time – some of the great modern artists began to experiment with the use of artificial light. By the early 1900s, figures such as Tatlin, Naum Gabo and especially László Moholy-Nagy, added artificial light to their toolbox and made it a relevant artistic medium, on par with oils and other tools of the trade. Some of the most important innovations were realized during the 1920s in connection with Moholy-Nagy's experiments with light and moving objects. First exhibited in 1930, his *Modulateur espace-lumière* was a wondrous feat of collaboration with engineers and technicians and consisted of bits of metal rotating on a base which was illuminated by spotlights projecting a mobile shadow onto the surrounding walls. In this groundbreaking work, Moholy-Nagy created a new type of art object which incorporated light as a material component of the artistic process.

Two decades later, at the 1951 Milan Triennial, the Italian artist Lucio Fontana caused something of a commotion when he presented a large-scale neon-work suspended from the

ceiling of the main exhibition hall. And in mid-1950s the artists Nicolas Schöffer and Julio le Parc launched 'l'Art lumino-cinétique' where they used fused moving multi-colored rays of artificial light into a formal display. At the same time, Gyula Kosice, the founder of Madi, a group of Brazilian artists, initiated the use of neon as a modern artistic medium.

But it is not until artists like Dan Flavin and James Turrell enter the frame in the 1960s that we see light-based work coalesce into a genuine trajectory of contemporary art. Flavin, one of Minimalism's key artists, offers spectators the most tangible existential experience – in comparison with a purely visual experience – in his separation of the finished work from its traditional plinth or picture frame. Using fluorescent tubes, Flavin disperses industrial zones of light with obscure, hazy, nebulous contours – and without the impact of shadow. Turrell goes even further in his construction of astounding immersive environments in which spectators merge with light as tangible, volatile bodies. Moving through Turrell's illuminated spaces is essentially a physical and mental experience and a constituent part of the work itself.

Although the number of artists who work solely with light is relatively small, many have done so sporadically in an effort to further their particular artistic strategies. Bruce Nauman has used flashing neon lights to set a narrative in motion and introduce ambiguous meanings. Joseph Kosuth incorporated yellow lighting in his radical conceptual artwork *Three Yellow Words* (1965) as an element of the work's self-definition. And in more recent years, Olafur Eliasson has repeatedly drawn on light so as to engage with ephemeral phenomena and slippages between the artificial and the natural.

* * *

Miguel Chevalier is one of the most distinctive artists today, largely owing to what he calls his 're-creations of nature.' As with many of his esteemed predecessors, Chevalier implements time and light as the raw materials of his artistic experiments and development – as tools to grapple with our natural surroundings. Yet Chevalier notably pushes the envelope in a new direction through his incorporation of software, which becomes amazing creative processes. This digital emphasis has its own life, initiated by the artist, but without any attempt to conceal its overtly technological origins and mechanisms. Conceptually, Chevalier produces work that functions as a simulacrum of nature: nothing is preconceived but meanders instead as an unpredictable proliferation of the digital landscape. His works are about life, mutation, transition and perpetual movement, which in their architectural and environmental installations includes, incorporates or even engulfs the spectator through interactive dialogues, and confront him with the architecture scale and the urban spaces all around the world (Paris, Bueno Aires, Seoul, Eindhoven, Mumbai…)

In Chevalier's *Ultra-Nature* series, dating from the beginning of the new millennium, the computer has been programmed with '18 seeds,' each of which possesses infinite parameters of growth, size, colors, number of sheets and flowers. Thanks to these 18 seeds, you could create different virtual gardens like a landscape designer, who would manage his composition. Between minimalism and baroque, these flowers reflect paradoxically liberty and spontaneity, thanks to all the possibilities and combinations of the software and calculations, giving a large variety of universes.

In the more recent *Fractal Flowers* series, begun in 2007, there is now an infinity of seeds and therefore endless developmental feasibilities. It is a new generation of virtual gardens, which produce gigantic fractal flowers of different sizes, colors and shapes. The originality and the power of this creation concentrate on this generator from which we can create a selection of the most beautiful flowers. Through atypical shapes and amazing colors, artificial paradises are created. Furthermore, this work depends on a generative and interactive principle, creating autonomous virtual seeds, growing, opening out, fading and reacting to the audience. It

reveals stylized flowers, rooted in extremely geometrical shapes. We are presented with an intriguing vegetal universe, full of crystal-like flowers with a wire frame resembling the facets of a diamond, which have on the one hand a veritable monumentality with its geometrical shapes, and on the other hand an evanescent quality, when after some seconds, the flowers evaporate in the air like clouds becoming progressively blurred. These enormous flowers that cast a glance at the visitors, look back at them according to their movements, thus creating an enigmatic dialogue. Flowers bow as if to welcome the public into this mysterious virtual garden, then display their most beautiful colors and shapes, look at them, merge on colored backgrounds, lean out, observe, approach our reality, to then finally disappear, out of sight, away from our fascinated gaze, us touched by the real interaction with a virtual object.

This corpus of work is made possible by a new kind of generator that is capable of creating more varied kinds of gigantic plants and individual species that appear simultaneously within the same work: stalks, leaves, stipules, stolons, sedges, nodes, find themselves little by little in a condition of spatial dissolution. Chevalier's virtual gardens draw attention to the pixel's basic framework, creating a fascinating imagery of mysterious plants and flowers which slowly take on autonomous geometrical structures before vanishing again. These installations of projected digital gardens and 'fractal flowers' constitute a novel journey through different time and light zones adapted to specific architectural layouts. Within the frame of the projection, one finds the multiplicity of time, or different times, running parallel. Indeed, the architecture is itself in a state of perceptual disintegration as Chevalier's imagery flows over and around it, encouraging viewers to enter the work. This distinctly recalls the Minimalists' interest in drawing spectators into a work's 'arena,' but Chevalier radicalizes the relationship between artwork and audience by enveloping the viewer in a light-time-setting: spectators become an integral part of the work (images are 'pasted' onto the viewer's skin and cloths) as their movements activate hidden sensors and thus help to define the artwork's de facto boundaries. This phenomenological condition has a suggestive link to the views of Merleau-Ponty as set out in *L'Oeil et l'esprit* ('Eye and Spirit,' 1964):

> Because my body is visible and mobile, it pertains to things, it is one of them, it is a part of the world's mesh, and it has the same cohesion as a thing. But because it sees and moves, it holds things in circles around itself as an attachment or extension of itself, they are embedded in its flesh, they partake of its complete definition, and the world is made of the same stuff as the body.[i]

Swathed in light and the projection's image, and circumscribed by the building, the body becomes a dynamic, interactive, sensual consciousness, which gives form and meaning to both the work and to the surroundings. Here, as in much of Chevalier's oeuvre, the spectator's motion is a fundamental component of the work's manifestation. Yet, as suggested at the outset of this essay, this focus on motion is also concerned with a focus on time – a time, which eludes the processing of a rational sequence of events.

Each artwork and every motion holds a surprise for the spectator, particularly how Chevalier's use of light and digital lines create unexpected atmospheres – forms and constellations that are often astoundingly beautiful. As a support for the projected imagery, the artist also creates gorgeous geometrical structures which capture the artificial light without trying to produce an 'illusion:' the display apparatuses are always an integral material aspect of the finished work. In a way, each of the pieces is a type of tautology, an artwork which explains itself through its own continuous deconstruction. The effects and mechanics are exposed; a 'digital poetry' surfaces.

In the relation between technique and visual effect, between 'cause and effect,' we see Chevalier's regard for modernist ideas and concepts. In particular, we witness a fresh connection play out between art and nature through a vision which can be defined as 'techno-naturalistic:' nature is never presented 'as is,' but as a reconstruction initiated by the artist.

Despite the overwhelming presence of plants and vegetation in his work, Chevalier is hardly an ecologist in the traditional sense, rather a neo-modernist who imports nature into art and subjects it to new socio-cultural and technological assessments. This is a critical art which condemns postmodernism's dissolution of the subject and which reassesses modernism's humanism without recourse to metaphysics. The artist, a visionary, designs experiments in which concepts like culture and nature merge and form a global judgment; the vulnerable and often beautiful situations that result evoke an awareness of environmental unity.

Over the course of the 1990s, much contemporary artistic production was aimed at incorporating 'social reality' into the creative process. Heralded under the ambitious framework of Nicolas Bourriaud's writing on 'relational aesthetics,' this generation of artists was involved in a consummate reassessment of the 1960s-era avant-gardes like Fluxus who sought, like the Dadaists before them, to assess our understanding of the divide between 'art' and 'life.' These artists were determined to turn the viewer into an active player in the spontaneous and more or less controlled process that leads to the formation of meaning. Well-known examples include Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who gifted mounds of sweets and stacks of posters to spectators, and Rirkrit Tiravanija, known for staging 'social situations' in which the public is invited to partake in an event (often a meal) within architectural installation conceived by the artist. In both cases, the event is the artwork (its form, substance and meaning); art includes and activates the viewer, and the artwork becomes a generative model of sociability.

The art of Miguel Chevalier is clearly related to this tendency. In his work, especially the installations, he draws viewers into specific 'social realities' where the artwork is actualized and the viewers made conscious of their own existence within peculiar environments. The end result is to highlight the artificiality of our lived environment, from brimming urban growth to the ceaseless reconditioning of nature. We can therefore say that Miguel Chevalier pursues in a most original way a strain of 'technological humanism' that comprises an important aspect of our most topical modern art. Sharply aware of his historical context, but also concerned to break with tradition, Chevalier recomposes visions of unity in a fresh social space where he invites the public to take part in inter-subjective relationships, and to work towards an increasingly dynamic type of phenomenological communication.

i   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'esprit*, 1964.