



Miguel Chevalier - Interview by Jérôme Sans, 1986

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Jérôme Sans: Most of the work carried out by artists on computers has been disappointing even uninteresting. Doesn't the computer, symbol of the modern world, serve as a pretext for the artist's own apology, as in science and technology? Why should we use the computer as the basis for writing?

Miguel Chevalier: How can art, which is also a reflection of a society, escape the gigantic mutation of society which the modern world is undergoing? The computer is making its appearance today in all fields and on all levels of society, on the domestic front or in interplanetary communications and including the business world. From now on the world in its entirety is being represented on floppy disk ; huge data banks instantly transferable to the four corners of the world, now constitute the new world memory.

As the principal actor in a field which until now has appeared mysterious and closed to those in the social sciences, literary and especially artistic fields, one which seemed to belong exclusively to computer programmers and technicians, the computer has become a basic tool in any action which, I have undertaken. This does not mean first reproducing the industrial output of this tool, whose power could mask an absence of concept ; it means considering the very nature of art as it relates to concrete values. Nor does it seem to me to be a graphic palette in the literal sense of the term, as a substitute for the painter's material. It is undoubtedly a generous tool, but falsely marked facile.

Inexhaustible and fabulous dictionary of forms and colors modifying, regenerating and exploding the image, one of unlimited possibilities, in a state of perpetual metamorphosis. All of these options correspond to my sequential work, compartmented to correspond to the organigram image of society. They express the importance which can be described as being at the crossroads of painting, video and photography, we can also enter the world of numerical values. But even if all seems mechanical, mathematical, I try, with Andy Warhol and Fernand Léger in mind, to use this machine to plumb the depths of humanity. In the world of Merleau Ponty, no new technical marvel has ever prohibited one from speaking of painting. My work can not be explained in mere technical terms.

J.S: What is your position toward the media?

M.C: I am fascinated by the abundance of images, joyous and tragic, which the media daily offer us. These images will be forgotten tomorrow to be replaced by others, or, if they remain, will amplify an ephemeral happening. The only contemporary condition of an image's existence is reiteration, persistence. The notion of urgency, of survival is forever present. I restructure everyday images taken from newspapers and magazines, from billboards and advertising films which are familiar to millions people. These images are made even more familiar by additional and recurrent reproduction: the continual movement and the appropriation and recycling of the image, out of this magma of images which invades

contemporary society, and our daily life, out of this overloading, this obsessive omnipresence, is born a blinding, a disintegration of the image.

J.S: Decomposition, disintegration, seem to be quite central to your approach, in an insistent, obsessive manner...

M.C: Multiple catastrophes resulting from powerful means put at our disposal due to scientific progress, threaten the survival of humanity. Examples of these are nuclear danger, pollution of the atmosphere, of the earth and of the marine life. Using a series of numeric variations which are systematically applied to an image. I suggest the risk of disintegration in the final moment. It is a sort of final appeal – or – the cycle of life.

These computer variations, these images find an echo in the work of certain artists who have a presentiment of this computer expression in their approach. There are Malevitch and Klein, who utilise the concept of infinite space, and especially Mondrian whose work evolves from an already reversible landscape into a geometric principle, disintegrating the geography of the composition, added to the list are Andy Warhol, for his variations on the color of light in his stereotyped images of consumer society, and Nam June Paik, who works with musical and chromatic video.

J.S: You often speak of baroque and classical art in your series...

M.C: Baroque and classical styles of art have left their mark on the history of art, which passes from one to the other in a way which escapes us, Wölfflin's study comes to mind here.

The use of a greenhouse as framework for one of my series is in this sense deliberate. It shows or evokes the conjunction of two antagonistic but at the same time complementary phenomena. On the one hand, the image of the tree represents the Baroque, the organic nature is shown as irregular. On the other hand, the metal structure of the greenhouse represents the structured, symmetrical, functional and thereby rational world i.e. The Classic continuing along the same line of thought, the greenhouse motive can be considered as an illusion not only to a modern city, but also to the absence of landscape in the city, where all that remains is the metonymical, nearly strange relic of a tree, object of worship, that can only grow and develop – just as the rest of the world – within the confines of a sterile greenhouse. I have the impression of travelling, of exploring the landscape I'm drawing as I go along changing constantly from the abstract world of thought to the figurative reality we are obsessed by, and vice versa. However, reality remains full of potentiality and I wish to continue- perhaps until it's selfdestruction...

J.S: In the same systematic way your pictures are placed in a square, divided into four smaller squares.

M.C: In brief, a computer screen has a mosaic grid pattern, consisting of thousands of tiny squares called pixels, an American abbreviation of « picture element ». This is the picture's and its decomposition's smallest component. I have often been compared to the atom concept, which can be traced back to the Greeks. However, the definition of the world atomic is relative to the atom's nucleus and it's disintegration. Also, the square is regarded by computer scientists as the most simple of all forms, making maximum use of space and manipulating it in it's entirety. That is why my work is systematically divided into four or it's multiple 16: so as to convey both the rigorous Cartesianism that governs the modern world's memory and the diagram that structures industrial, urban society. This does not imply that I am mathematics or science fanatic. The square is to me the antidynamic figure par excellence, the opposite of a smooth circular movement. It symbolizes a break in time, a moment where time has stopped. It is also the metaphore of the camera, which I often use in my work with a 6 x 6 film. I use the square divided into smaller squares also because I wish to take up again the figure of the cross this unique symbol in the history of art, which is the very image of a force that both totalizes and neutralizes opposing principles...

J.S: You use the colours of the light?

M.C: On a computer screen colour is light. The colours are created by red, green and blue electron beams, which, following mathematic calculations, can generate an infinite number of chromatic variations : a stream of 16 millions numerical colours flash by in the matter of hours !Seurat has in a way worked along these lines, using Chevreul's scientific theories. His method consists of combining pictorial brush strokes, placed side according to the above mentioned principle. Seurat was to influence Mondrian's big square compositions, where the artist carries the purity of his abstract networks to the extreme, using the primary colours – red, yellow and blue – from which all the other colours ensue. The same consistency, the same insistant use of red, green and blue can be found in my work, not only because I wish to re-use the themes of these artists but above all because I want to work with colours through light, since here they cannot exist without it. By injecting a flow of colours the process of disintegrating the picture is intensified. The synthesis of the primary colours being white – a colour I also use – the picture is attracted, compressed and torn from within.

J.S: You are now also starting a new series of pictures, depicting sports. Is this a metaphore of performance or is it an ironical, social and political view of the world?

M.C: Sports have always been central in the structure of society, but they have acquired a new dimension these days. The cult of well-being and keeping fit, which is advocated in the mass media is the very images of the new type of modern man: not only is he efficient at work, he is also dynamic and in good shape. Sports are still a social symbol, but have unquestionably also an economical dimension and can even be used politically. The technique is becoming increasingly more sophisticated, the performances better and better. Man is therefore constantly faced with more and more difficult ordeals.

When I use pictures from this particular universe, it will always be in combinations such as « a footballplayer shooting », « a swimmer swimming »... My objective is not to glorify the performance or the beauty of the human body, but rather to demonstrate the mechanism and the futility of the act. Unlike Marey or Muybridge, who decomposed the movement in order to analyse it and unlike the Italian futurists who worked on the concept of speed and movement as symbolizing the pace of the modern industrial world, I « freeze » the bodies in movement, as if they were fossilized in the rock of their activity.