Virtual Mediterraneans, or the Intoxications of Time
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You arrive, dazzled by the bluish light of sun and sea on Arvieux Square with its old and now renovated Saint-Simonian warehouses, and you are struck by a huge, slanted sculpture that is wound around itself, shining brightly with its florescent orange. By itself alone, such a sloping spiral, 18 meters high with a 100-ton pedestal as its foundation, cuts a figure of the Mediterranean--the vividly colored Mediterranean of its boats, that of its shell-like forms, which inspired its creation, and that of the history of *Massalia*, the original Greek Marseilles, now 2,600 years' old. A landmark, and henceforth a symbol of the city, it evokes one of the first forms of both humanity and *mare nostrum*: the spiral of time.

And day turns to night. Everything is metamorphosed in the poetic and unreal atmosphere of a virtual garden inspired by Mediterranean flora, which is projected onto the warehouses 28 meters high.

What we have here is an immense digital skin on which huge plants and flowers come to life, rise up, interlace, droop down, die, and are reborn, spiked as they with their prickly points and their near-abstract fractal forms, ever changing, and ever transformed by your movements. Time here is ephemeral and infinite, interactive, and above all it is a time of a cosmic Mediterranean garden re-created by the most contemporary technological means. It is as if nature, driven to the point of the most extreme artifice, was able to rediscover the quivering of flowers and the fluttering of leaves in a full-blown poetics of meditation that for me is reminiscent of Japan.

The great solidity of steel, sloping down in apparent near equilibrium, joins the impressive weightlessness of an elusively fluid immateriality. We find ourselves standing before an unprecedented technological and artistic feat that has required the collaboration of engineers during a several-year-long artistic project successfully completed in its various stages. This is an entire experience in its own right, an adventure, and an artistic and intellectual path that is to be retraced.

I. The Time of the Work: The Sculpture

So, at the beginning, there were some drawings and then a series of scale models that give us a glimpse of how both the shape and the project were worked out. Here, a movement that turns around itself, there, a sloping angle, or a play of shadow and light. And everywhere, the imaginary of a maritime world: a conch, a shell enlarged to gigantic proportions, with its sharp edges and its inside-outside surface wrapped around a central axis held up on a pedestal with its future projection booth located at the end. A double bet has been wagered: the steel sculpture will be slanted and the shape will fold around itself in a fragment of a spiral. The engineers had calculations to make for the enormous concrete cube that is to

anchor it and to balance the sculpture's smooth and asymmetrical mass. There was work for everyone. One discovers in the scale models a steel frame, resembling those of boats, that will put everything in its "hold." There will be studio visits with Miguel Chevalier and Charles Bové, a first testing of the shape, large enough so that people can explore it at their full height. And then, covered in its slick surface coating, it was to be mounted and assembled slab by slab like a ribbon. On the ground or placed on one of its sides, it turns like a huge extraterrestrial UFO, several stories high. It still had to be painted in the shiny rustproof orange used on boats. And then transported, too, two days from Beaucaire to Marseilles in an "abnormal load" truck convoy. Yet, the most difficult task remained: hoisting it up with a crane in order to rivet it onto its pedestal/casing, so as to anchor it in place. One still marvels at the finished project, as well as all these technical and technological exploits, now that the sculpture inhabits the square, transforming it into an unquestioned feature of this urban setting. This huge shell or artificial coral blade has become part of the landscape.

In choosing the spiral as their model, Chevalier and Bové were not merely reviving one of the artistic and architectural forms that have marked both the history of humanity and that of Marseilles from the Neolithic Age to the Baroque period. As Robert Smithson had done with his *Spiral Jetty*, they chose an environmental shape capable of occupying space-time. Both open and closed, it draws a flowing line and a universe that meet up with what Gilles Deleuze called "smooth spaces." Like seas in motion or desert dunes, such spaces are defined by their rhythmic quality as well as their ability to extend to infinity. For, when you turn around this spiral, it turns with you, as life does. Like a lighthouse in an urban space, it immediately attracts one by its cosmic verticality and its coiled slant, like a ship's sail on the nearby sea. Now, this same infinite time is to be found again at night in the projected virtual garden, where each image, each instant is new, ever present and ever lost. For, unlike video, the virtual never loops back around; its programming itself is infinite. One never sees the same image twice, and everything is in permanent metamorphosis. Another adventure and another sensorial experience commence. They are that of a flux-image, a time-image without horizon, akin to light.

II. The Virtual Time of the Mediterranean Garden

Throughout the history of art, plants and flowers have been Vanities of the aquatic, nearly abstract world, as with Monet's *Water Lilies*. But here, palm trees and cactuses press upon each other; they grow, climb, flourish, and stir like curious animals with articulated shapes, organic pseudopodia, and abstract robotics as reminiscent of the land as of the sea. For, thanks to three high-powered video projectors that clothe the surface of the warehouses with a moving fabric of light, you find yourself in a totally virtual, computer-created and computer-generated world 28 meters high by 14 meters across. There is no horizon, just an unstable and transparent fluidity that would have pleased László Moholy-Nagy, an artist who "dreamed of devices that would allow one to project visions of light in the air." That is what these *Second Natures* are: a new adventure in "visions of light" wherein nature and artifice combine in cycles of summer and winter, life and death.

At the start, there is an unprecedented generative software program composed of six "virtual seeds," a sort of "digital herbarium"[1] made from sketched shapes translated into algorithms. For, the virtual implies a new creative process where the formal idea gives birth to a genuine digitally written composition made of calculations and based on pixels and the fractal models discovered by Benoît B. Mandelbrot,[2] who employs a non-Euclidean and nonlinear geometry. Irregular like a geographic coastline or a cauliflower, fractals possess an internal law: each part, however minute, resembles the whole.

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1 Jean-Pierre Balpe and Miguel Chevalier, *L'herbier* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).
2 Benoît Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1982).

In other words, here science and art are inseparable, and the projections of Marseilles on the Warehouses are the fruit of more than twenty years of research, installations, experimentations, and exhibitions in galleries, arts centers, or museums and in the public space in France as well as abroad. From *Supernatures* (2003) to *Fractal Flowers* (2008), the installations of interactive virtual reality have gone forth and multiplied, from Buenos Aires to Paris, from Lisbon to Singapore, and from Sao Paolo to Seoul. *Fractal Flowers in vitro 2008* was a work that had already creatively combined digital art with architecture, the real and the virtual, in a glasshouse on whose walls grew light flowers (in the square in front of the Town Hall of the Fourth District of Paris). And let us not forget the perennial projection of a *Fractal Flowers* garden that has been taking place in Seoul since 2008 on the banks of the Cheonggyecheon River. And again this past Summer, these *Fractal Flowers* draped, with their artificial light, the bottom of a quite Platonic quarry/cave at the Mas de la Pyramide in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.

Does not clothing the real in order to metamorphose it with a second skin of a revisited "digital impressionism" containing all its variations of forms and light change our relationship to nature and the urban landscape, offering a permanent challenge in its border crossings and multiplying contexts? For, here, on a background of white light, the Mediterranean garden plays itself out in all kinds of shapes and in a symphony of electric colors. Huge red flowers filling up almost the entire breadth of the wall, a purplish flower with its zigzags of starry fuchsia, a sunflower or a flower in intense blue, cactuses with bursts of orange-red reminiscent of the sculpture itself or palm trees mounting up high, the better to bloom, this Mediterranean garden, which is also visible from the staircases surrounding the square, is a permanent enchantment wherein everything bends forward, moves about, and metamorphoses. In its weightless state, it is evocative of the air or the ebb and flow of the sea, so much so that some green or red pixelated leaf darts off on a horizontal line like a fish. Another then rises up and twists around in an almost organic, kaleidoscopic movement, like a starfish gone mad. Animal-like flowers or anatomical ones intertwine and fight with each other like a "cactus-porcupine" that zebra-stripes its way across the entire space, sprouting from above as well as from below. We discover a whole series of interworlds wherein sea and sky exchange their flows, and even their flux-images.

But above all, this virtual and interactive Mediterranean of your dreams is transformed by your own movements, thanks to two infrared cameras. You turn around the sculpture, and presto, the flowers turn around themselves. A streetcar arrives and it stirs up a virtual wind, changing things from the fullness of Summer to the sparseness of Winter. Gradually, the corollas of the flowers fall off petal by petal, the trees bend over, and the leaves fall down in a poetic rain, nearly like that of the flowers of Japan's cherry trees. It is as if the virtual was thinking that time exists--so much so that the garden, in its seasonal moments, becomes a gigantic metaphor for life and death. As Bokusui Wakayama wrote in a haiku, "Very near me/Autumn's flowers told me/We always regret what's gone."

But here, the regret is but momentary. Suddenly, the garden is reborn and expands in search of its summer splendor, once again transforming one's view of the city. I think then of this paradox of the digital world. While it can alter the imaginary and create an entire transcultural circulation of images that delocalizes art, on the other hand it also transforms known sites into "unknown" ones by creating a genuine poetics of reverie and time that directly affects the viewer. And it is in fact just pure light.

III. The Viewer, or the Intoxications of Time

Here you are then at night, caught up in the lighting of the square, the reflections of the sculpture, and this virtual garden that reminds you of everything Mediterranean, from the West as well as from the East. And, like the character from Jorge Luis Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths," you tell yourself: "I felt myself to be, for an unknown period of time, an abstract

perceiver of the world."[3] This is a world in which the distinction between the real and the virtual wavers. For, all these luminous textures and touches, all this becomingness of plants, all this plurality of spaces and times bombards you and transforms you. Here we have a whole "bloc of changes" with their symbioses, their alliances, and their combinations among the heterogeneous kingdoms of the cosmos. Visual sensation, haptic sensation (from *haptō*, to touch), motor sensation--an entire polysensorial experience overwhelms you. And little by little, you are caught up in a slightly dizzying intoxication, and on that floating level you become, indirectly, the author of the work, as Marcel Duchamp had wanted. Between virtual and actual, and in the infinite and saturated superimpositions of these crystalline images, you live a multiple time as light as the fall of the leaves that beset you. You start to dream, and you are caught up little by little in a philosophical meditation on the existent. Virtual or real? Being or nonbeing? Present or already past? Artificial or natural? Or rather, a *Second Nature*, bound up with a seasonal time. For, here time is programmed. In Summer, there is mass flourishing; in Winter, there are emaciated plants--to such an extent that the time of the garden and your contemplative time merge in an ephemeral one that is nothing other than the modulation and rustling of the transparency of diaphanous light. The immense solidity of the sculpture becomes lost in this terrestrial and aquatic world in which all these purplish blues summon up clouds mingling with waves. Between steadfastness and mobility, territory and loss of place, the image is a screen, and the screen a voyage into a reinvented landscape.

Such is this technological neo-Baroque world, which brings one back in touch with the turbulences, the curves, and the luminous painting of the historical Baroque period that has marked the cultural history of Marseilles. And little by little you come to understand that a work of this sort entails a true artistic and technological revolution. Henceforth, randomness, chance, and indetermination belong as parts of virtual programs, like palettes of colors, sorts of data banks that can be blended in grams and with infinite variations. The growth of the garden then multiplies, along with the combinatory of procedures, so as to engender a vegetal network in which one is to "saturate each atom," as Virginia Woolf had wanted. And while all of modernity has privileged the individual and "seeing things from one's own point of view," here one sees from the world's point of view. One is even "on the world's time," in the projection and infinite circulation between images and movements.

You then return to Arvieux Square in the full light of day. The sculpture towers up there full sail, coiling around, like a boat or a lighthouse that holds sway over the nearby Mediterranean. And you set off on another voyage, this time toward the origin, that of the Greek sailor, the *Protis* of legend who, coming from Phocaea (near present-day Izmir), founded *Massalia*. And as every origin is mythical, you learn that Marseilles was born of the love of a Princess for this sea voyager, a true linkage among all things Mediterranean, east and west, real and virtual.

And then another Ionian, Heraclitus, gives you the coded, calculated key to these *Second Natures* and their poetics of multiplicities: "The hidden harmony is better than the visible one."

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Esthétique de l'éphémère (Paris: Galilée 2003)

Philosophie de l'Ornement. D'Orient en Occident, trans. from the Italian (Paris: Galilée 2008)

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3   Jorge Luis Borges, "The Garden of Forking Paths," *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1964).