



## Jérôme Neutres - 2018 In the Flesh of the Image

*Research (A) Head [La recherche en tête]* is the title of a work by Miguel Chevalier. As Pierre Restany has said, by itself, this title summarized the spirit of the work of an artist who, for forty years, has made a name for himself as a searcher [*chercheur*] for the most prolific sorts of shapes and images. Only a great artist invents and reinvents his art. Today, Chevalier is recognized worldwide as a pioneer of generative and algorithmic art. He has exhibited his work in the four corners of the world—for example, recently, during the Astana [Kazakhstan] World's Fair and at the French National Galleries of the Grand Palais, with the exhibition *Artists & Robots*. His interactive and generative exhibitions, twenty-first-century frescos that shatter the space and time of a work, fascinate us as much as they oblige us to (re)question ourselves about the mechanisms of artistic creativity and the essence of an artwork. Restany explained "Miguel Chevalier's images are traces, in real time, of a passage of energy. Of this immaterial energy, which is the basis for all communication: Yves Klein, who brilliantly had a presentiment of its cosmic breadth and universal import, did not hesitate to pour it into zones of pictorial sensibility and to create therefrom multiple, boundless art objects. Chevalier, who is equally sensitive to the poetic energy of the immaterial realm, appropriates its power of transmission via the tool of computers and data communication".<sup>1</sup>

Chevalier's art is the history of an extended quest in search of this "real time of artistic energy." To render visible this invisible flow, in order to display the immaterial realm, the artist has invented new forms of expression in the visual arts, transforming the computer into a veritable artist's studio of creative activity. Quite early on, he perceived that the computer could be an "inexhaustible and fabulous dictionary of shapes and colors that bursts apart images, alters them, and regenerates them. Its possibilities are endless and in perpetual metamorphosis."<sup>2</sup> In order to combine images in *real time*, his most accomplished installations come into existence through the operations of a dual device designed and programmed by the artist: a system of algorithmic combinations capable of producing, while also replenishing *ad infinitum*, an imaginative proposition articulated around a theme, a subject, or a form; and an interactive installation that captures the movements of the work's viewers and influences the work's form as much as its content. In Chevalier's works of perpetual change, more than ever "it's the viewers who make the pictures," as Marcel Duchamp said.

While in our era, fascinated by the applications and implications of artificial intelligence, the issues involved in Chevalier's art are part and parcel of the *Zeitgeist*, the same could not be said of the time, back when this avant-gardist began his artistic career. In the late 1970s, when he was a student at the School of Fine Arts in Paris (ENSBA) and then at the School of Decorative Arts, painting had completed its comeback, with Free Figuration, Graffiti

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Restany, "La recherche en tête," in *Miguel Chevalier* (Milan, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Miguel Chevalier, interview with Jérôme Sans, in *Miguel Chevalier, Images Nouvelles* (Belfort: Editions Granit—Centre d'art contemporain, 1987).

Art, Keith Haring, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Photography and video had not yet received full recognition; Gérard Garouste was the star of the French arts scene, and even César, a professor at ENSBA, taught his students to draw from living models. When people were just beginning to talk about the information society and computers, Chevalier wanted to enter the artistic side of this field and develop a digital form of art. The approach this artist proclaimed upon his return from a residency in New York remained nearly inaudible in a France whose artistic institutions are, by definition, highly conservative. A young artist who, following in the footsteps of Norman Maclaren, painted on slides or recycled TV screens and produced compressed and recolored videos inspired by Nam June Paik, appeared to be an "alien" in this institutional world where only Roger Tallon, a designer close to the New Realists, and Restany, a discoverer of new talents, exhorted him to pursue his adventurous path. It was when he created a decor for the Uzès Festival—a projection of computer screenshots on paintings—that Chevalier met Serge Equilbey, an engineer at the Optics Center of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). Computers, which at the time were as large as houses, were reserved exclusively for scientists. This engineer granted Miguel access to some giant calculators, the CNRS's Numelec computers, which could analyze images in several successive processing stages. Zooming in, the artist discovered that the screens of these machines were composed not of points but of square pixels. Chevalier's art was going to be organized around an analysis of the geometricization of shapes, as well as around the artistic possibilities such geometricization can engender. Exploring the image's flesh, its texture, Miguel digitalized his painted slides and discovered an initial style, an electronic-era variant of Georges Seurat's pointillism (Seurat himself having been inspired by the theories of Michel-Eugène Chevreul on the diffraction of light—the light diffraction that is to be found, once again, in the cathode ray tube).

Here we have Chevalier's credo, his artistic program: "Doing painting with computers." That does not mean that the computer is the contemporary version of the palette of yesteryear. The three primary colors of painting—yellow, red, blue—become, in the computer, green, red, blue. Here the painter works "like a light dimmer" rather than a mixer of colored paints.<sup>3</sup> The computer is another palette, distinct from the old one, and it opens a new field of possibilities. The art that flows therefrom will take other forms. Chevalier's first one-man show was presented in Belfort in 1987—with Jérôme Sans as curator. The following year, he participated (along with Jean-Michel Othoniel and Yan Pei-Ming, among others) in the *Ateliers 88* exhibition organized by the ARC (Animation, Recherche, Confrontation) department at the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris. This was the occasion where he met Pontus Hultén, who brought Chevalier into Hultén's Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques (Institute for advanced study in the visual arts). The first presentation of his works in a gallery, Sylvana Lorenz's on the Rue Chapon, was a dazzling success: Denyse and Philippe Durand-Ruel and their children bought out the entire show. This couple of visionary collectors then became Miguel's patrons. When most critics at the time remained dubious about this desire to consider the resources of the computer as one of the fine arts, Chevalier argued that "the entire world is now being entered on diskettes; a colossal databank, transmittable instantaneously to the four corners of the Earth, is the world's new memory."<sup>4</sup> Chevalier's career, made up of experiments and his struggles to show these experiments and establish their legitimacy, meets up with the fate of all his precursors in their artistic investigations and battles: "He saw things in the right way at the right moment," Restany said about him. "He belongs among the very rare number of explorers of the world of computer communication, who reveal to us the new profile images are taking on in our global culture, as well as the direction toward which they are destined to head."<sup>5</sup> As a "Villa Médicis hors-les-murs" grant recipient, Miguel left for Tokyo in 1989 to study computer-made images. There, he made his

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<sup>3</sup> Miguel Chevalier, interview with the author, December 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Miguel Chevalier, interview with Jérôme Sans, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Restany, *La recherche en tête*, *op. cit.*

first interactive video work whose images were computer generated. This piece also initiated a theme—artificial nature—that was going to become recurrent in his work. Convinced of the emergence and ineluctable development of artificial life, Chevalier continued to imagine nonstop all the possible ways one could model an “artificial nature.” Developments in computer technology allowed him, as his work evolved, to deepen his concept of *Sur-Nature* or *Ultra-Nature* (the title of a 2005 installation). Graphic cards allowed 3D worlds to be configured in real time, and flat screens permitted their exhibition. In this way, beginning in 2000, Chevalier created a series of generative digital herbaria. The virtual gardens of this twenty-first-century landscape painter are strewn with “Fractal Flowers.” Since the time of antiquity, artists have been interested in the representation of nature. In the Classical period, in France, painters like Nicolas Poussin and Louis-Joseph Le Lorrain were already, in their own way, painting purely invented landscapes, mainly involved features drawn from their own imaginaries. It can be said that Chevalier fits within this tradition of imaginary nature, which is to be found again, in the early twentieth century, in the jungles of Henri Rousseau, who had never seen any other landscapes of tropical plants but those arising beneath the greenhouse roofs in Paris's Jardin des Plantes. Yet in the era of virtual reality, Chevalier goes beyond those frozen imaginary views of nature to show us generative artificial forms of nature that grow unendingly and change *ad infinitum* before our eyes. This is, in the end, a work of art that shows, as we are told by Nicolas Schöffer, a pioneer among the pioneers of robotic art, that “life is not repetitive,” whether it be in nature or in urban jungles, as with another of Chevalier's crucial series, *Meta-Cities*. This materialization of the nonrepetitive character of life is achieved in all its dimensions in this artist's work. And in several dimensions at once, for Chevalier's works have taken over the public space, particularly over the past decade, with installations that are increasingly monumental in scale and that must thereby interact with an ever-larger audience. This was the case with the immersive installation set in the Carrières de lumière (Light quarries) in Les Baux-de-Provence, France in 2012 (7,500 square meters and 70 video projectors), his largest work to date; with the 1,100-square-meter generative and interactive carpet presented during the Festival of Islamic Art in Sharjah in 2014 (*Digital Arabesques*); and again with the permanent installation set beneath the new canopy built above the Forum des Halles in Paris in 2017 (*Pixels Wave Light*).

No great artist is without his paradoxical side. While seeking, in an obsessional way, to show us the flowing movements and immaterial networks that constitute the fluidity of the creative gesture, Chevalier has also, from the start of his artistic quest, worked to preserve concrete traces of his investigations, to fix in place the strongest images of his uninterrupted creative activity, and to render real, essentially virtual artistic forms and shapes. In order to materialize the immaterial, in the early 1980s he made screen-capture photographs or did silkscreen prints on wood or canvas. Then came his videos, filmed instants of generative life, and 3D printed sculptures. When now, so many artists are transforming the real into the virtual through the digitalization of images and shapes, Chevalier is reifying computer files, thus creating what could be called post-virtual works and sculptures. At a time when everything has become digitalized, this artist is once again calling back into question what *creating a work* means. Miguel Chevalier, or anticipatory art.