Flower Power, Vincent Huguet, 2011

Some 1s and 0s. Just 1s and 0s, under one another in a sort of slow digital rain. You might think that you have returned to the past, back during that now-distant era when the first computer screens came into homes or, better, back at the time of the French Minitel and those gray-black screens on which tiny and not always clear illuminated characters would shine forth. Some 1s and 0s--that is, the two components of digital language, which amounts to saying: the yin and the yang of the civilization in which we live, the numerals we do not ordinarily see, hidden as they are beneath the many combinations that here produce sounds and there produce images. Moreover, the slightest gesture will set these 1s and 0s in motion and mix them up, so that they melt into a vague landscape, a sort of cloud. In other words, all that is needed is a gesture, a movement, for these numerals to be turned into images. These 1s and 0s are neither the product of a computer bug nor sheep being counted by some insomniac mathematician. They go to make up *Binary Wave* (2010), a work recently created by Miguel Chevalier that is projected on a wall or a screen and that "reacts" to the presence and the movements of any viewers who might happen by.

For an artist who has for years been showing his incredibly sophisticated images all over the world, the return to this original form of digital language would be somewhat surprising if it did not immediately charm us precisely on account of its archaic--or, as art historians would say, "archaistic"--dimension. Beneath this gently swaying rain of numerals, one is reminded of Guillaume Apollinaire's famous 1916 calligram, *It's Raining*, where the words, falling like water droplets, begin: "It's raining women's voices as if they were dead even in memory." For an artist who is considered to be one of the pioneers in France of what is awkwardly called *digital art*, this *Binary Wave*, in tandem with the words of Apollinaire, might be the equivalent of a *vanitas* in which the distraught, or even horrified, artist would be witness to the fall of those 1s and 0s that for years now have formed the invisible basis of his language. Or, on the contrary, he might look on them as the painter looks at his palette and his brushes, or the sculptor his tools.

Chevalier has been, from the early 1980s, one of the first to use this coded language in his work, doing so in collaboration with scientists, engineers, and programmers. Yet he no longer is just the lone adventurer this eccentric and visionary artist was back when he spent his nights working on the computers at the Optics Center with the support of the French National Center for Scientific Research. For, over the past thirty years, most artists have, though sometimes without knowing it, also become digital artists, in the sense that their creative work could not be carried out without the help of digital technologies. That is obvious in the case of photography, video, and an entire portion of musical creation, but it also is the case for artists who use several different media in their works, and for whom "digital technology" is almost never absent during at least one of the moments of the artistic process. It could even be said that a wholly traditional painter, one who proudly uses only paints and brushes, is also dependent on digital technology--if, for example, in his work he uses photos taken with his cell phone.

Quite rare are the artists today who, strictly speaking, avoid this technology. Yet one can still distinguish, within the world of art, those who, like Chevalier, think that digital technology is not just a tool but also a field of experimentation in its own right--"an art that could not be done without those technologies," as Chevalier has summed it up. Such a definition could be found again at the birth of other technologies that have, since their inception, entered into the field of art: photography and cinema, too, have given birth to images, works, and points of view that no other medium would have allowed. One could go even further back in time and ask whether the same thing did not happen with the invention, for example, of oil painting or perspective, which suddenly allowed a new way of painting traditional methods did not permit.

The big difference, nonetheless, is that those innovations were born within the field of art for the field of art, whereas the development of digital technologies is a computer revolution that concerns the whole of society, and only some artists have decided to appropriate them. Here again, this is not the first time that the history of sciences and technologies--or, let us say, of "progress" of some sort--has posed a challenge to artists, who are free to take it up or not, as witness the famous anecdote of Marcel Duchamp, who, while visiting an Aeronautic Exhibition in 1912, stated to Fernand Léger and Constantin Brancusi while standing in front of a propeller that to him seemed perfect: "Painting is dead. Who will be able to do better than this propeller?" Chevalier indisputably belongs among those who not only do not turn their backs on the propeller but who seek, on the contrary, to know how it is made and, furthermore, how and with what materials the next one will be made.

This oft-told anecdote about Duchamp faced with that propeller is a lovely one because it has an allegorical dimension to it and because it can be understood as the updated version, for the early twentieth century, of Henry Fuseli's famous drawing *The Artist Moved to Despair at the Grandeur of Antique Fragments* (1778-1780, Kunsthaus, Zurich). There, an artist is seen to be seated at the foot of Constantine's monument, one hand on the sculpture, the other propping up his sad head. Duchamp standing in front of that propeller would be, rather, *The Artist Moved to Despair at the Grandeur of Modern Technologies*--or *Filled with Wonder*, rather, if one considers the fact that the consequence of this "revelation" is the invention of the readymade. In Fuseli's time, as well as in the time of Duchamp, the grandeur of "antique fragments," like the grandeur of industry or the power of the *Fée électricité* (the electricity fairy, as in Raoul Dufy's painting), has never prevented artists from doing creative work. A large portion of art history can be written by following this diving line between artists who have wanted to struggle *against* technological progress (and in particular against the changes associated with industrial revolutions, during the nineteenth century) and those who, on the contrary, have wanted to grab the wave head-on and surf upon it. Already enthusiastic about the future possibilities of "3D printers" (new machines that allow virtual objects to be materialized in the form of resin-based sculptures designed by a three-dimensional generative software program viewable on a screen), Chevalier indisputably belongs among those who are not driven to despair by progress and who are, instead, delighted by it.

Whence the beauty of this *Binary Wave*, which is a sort of *memento* or return to origins. This work is perhaps a way for Chevalier--at a time when the French National Studio of Contemporary Arts in Le Fresnoy will soon be celebrating its fifteenth anniversary and when a specific site in Paris (the Gaîté Lyrique) is being dedicated to the "digital arts" after having conquered most capitals and given rise to many festivals--to look back at the path traveled without indulging in nostalgia, and yet while restoring this language that has become so common in its original simplicity by rendering it visible behind the images it generates.

Over the past few years, Chevalier's creative works have had the quite botanical charm of those "virtual gardens" he has been growing on the facades of buildings in Buenos Aires and Lisbon (*Supra-Nature*, 2005-2006), along the Champs-Élysées (*Super-Natures*, 2007), in Marseilles (*Second Nature*, 2010), on the banks of the Cheonggyecheon River in Korea, and also in greenhouses in Paris, Istanbul, and Rio de Janeiro (*Fractal Flowers in Vitro*, 2008-2010-

2011). Also present in the herbaria he has reinvented (*Herbarius 2059*) and in iPhone and iPad applications (*Pixels Flowers*, 2010) he has created, these flowers, which have turned into *Fractal Flowers*, were bound to remind one of a long and uninterrupted tradition within the history of art that stretches from Persian miniatures to Flemish painters and from Hokusai's sublime peonies to those of Édouard Manet while passing, of course, by way of Claude Monet at Giverny and such Impressionist-era painter-gardeners as Gustave Caillebotte, who lovingly painted the cattleyas from his greenhouse. The examples, which would be too numerous to count, call to mind the fact that the representation of flowers is a universal affair from which contemporary art is not excluded. Purists will say that the flowers Chevalier sows have a genetically modified quality to them, especially the latest ones. But this lineage is one that sets Chevalier in a line of continuity rather than rupture in relation to the art that has preceded his work, and especially the art of the twentieth century. That the pixel has replaced the brush stroke does not, at bottom, change much of anything about the questions the artist asks himself or about his work on light, volume, or perspective. Indeed, most of his works seem to be the heir to the major research that was conducted during the last century as well as the extension thereof, whether one is thinking of the multiplicity of points of view about one and the same object that movement (of a flower, for example) allows, so that it can be perceived as the tail of the Cubist comet, or one is thinking of the projections Chevalier does on ever vaster urban or natural spaces, these being direct descendants of Land Art. During the Winter of 2010, the artist projected his giant *Digital Flakes* on snow-covered trails near the ski resort of Grand Bornand, France. This was like a dream come true for skiers, but it also had the potential for fulfilling a dream of Land Art artists, if one just thinks of the efforts now being undertaken by Christo to obtain permission to cover a portion of the Arkansas River. The projection of digital images allows one to intervene in a landscape on an almost unlimited scale, provided that there are sufficient number of video projectors that are themselves sufficiently powerful, while showing absolute respect for the site on which they might appear at nightfall. In this sense, digital technology can be a tool that allows one to resume the research of his glorious predecessors and to get beyond some of the blockages they faced. Of course, Christo would undoubtedly not agree to trade in his ropes and canvas for video projectors, but this example goes to show, a bit, what characterizes Chevalier's approach: a search for the territories new technologies open to the artist, yet still imbued with a very strong awareness and knowledge of the history of art.

The same goes for interactivity, which is present in most of Chevalier's works and which, at first glance, is taken to be one of the characteristic features of art in the digital age. When the artist began to introduce some interaction into his works with the help of ever more sensitive sensors of people's presence, the Wii console had not yet invaded one's livingroom, nor had all those games that have become so widespread over the past few years where the player's own body interacts with what is taking place on the screen. It is more than likely that the members of the post-joystick generation--that is to say, those born starting in the 2000s, will find absolutely nothing surprising about their bodies interacting with swaying flowers (*Fractal Flowers*) or pigments flowing across the surface of a screen that sketch out the movements of bodies (*Liquid Pixels*). At bottom, what interactivity does is realize, on the one hand, the old dream of the viewer--in the best of circumstances, that of touching, of caressing the work; at worst, that of leaving one's mark upon it, causing it some damage--and, on the other hand, that of the artist--of presenting a work that would be "listening in" on the viewer or, rather, looking at the person who is in the process of looking at it.

These flowers, pigments, or even organisms are not so far removed from those painted by Kandinsky that react to a passing visitor, as if moved by the action of a "virtual wind," to borrow the artist's lovely phrase. But what would happen if these were people's bodies, their faces, that were thus to come to life? How would passers-by and those who would approach these screens then behave? Would a human presence create a feeling of discomfort or, on the contrary, a deeper intensity?

It is surely not without significance that the human figure is almost totally absent from Chevalier's work. Endless expanses of mountains, seas, and lakes, these landscapes are deserted, mineralized (*Voyages*, 2004), like those seen at the opening of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. As for the flowers, whether they blossom on walls or on the glass panes of greenhouses, they never allow even a glimpse of the hand of the gardener who has sown and watered them. Not only is Chevalier's 2010 work *Terra Incognita* deserted, but most of his works are unsullied by any trace of human occupation--except, of course, in those ones that are dedicated expressly to cities (*Metapolis*, 2004, *Metacities*, 2006, and *Pixel City*, 2008). Yet it is notable that, even in those works, while buildings, structures, and infrastructure are visible, those who use them almost never are. No figure is represented. Might the artist have a taboo comparable to the one often--though wrongly--associated with art in Islamic lands, a form of art that is said to prefer interlacing and arabesques to people's complexions and their flesh, abstraction and mathematics to the challenges posed by the representation of human beings?

Chevalier's long stay in Marrakech, where he was in residence at the Riad Denise Masson (2004), would not serve to contradict this hypothesis. For, he has found in the art of the zellige an ornamental grammar that is close to his own and comparable to his language, so much does the ancestral geometry of Islamic art obey laws computer software is also familiar with and is able to develop without end. Like the traveling artists who, beginning in the eighteenth century and until the time of Henri Matisse and Paul Klee, wanted to give new life to their art in the light of Cairo, Isfahan, or Grenada, Chevalier, far removed from any Orientalist fantasies, has clearly found in Morocco a confirmation of intuitions he has held for a long time. His creative work does not *represent* human figures, but it imperiously calls to them, as the painted walls of a mosque or a Turkish bath have meaning only if the shadows of bodies frequently pass over them. Indeed, it is in the very heart of the city, where the city is at its most teeming, that Chevalier wants to situate the lovely project he will one day perhaps carry out: a series of flying carpets floating above the stall holders and snake charmers of Jemaa el Fna Square, *digital arabesques* above the curls of smoke that fill the area when night falls (*Flying Carpets* and *Digital Constellations*, 2005). An exemplary site of comings and goings, the square is the setting for the most natural and ancestral form of "interactivity." Yet that is undoubtedly more clearly obvious here than elsewhere: passers-by leap to avoid mopeds and small horse-drawn or donkey-drawn carts, the square's low-paid workers and the hennaed peddler of old teeth cast their glances and make their gestures, drawn by the flow of tourists, and Gnawas, and the snakes themselves, make their own paths. To see, on Jemaa el Fna Square, a tourist pass by the stalls of the young orange-juice peddlers or to look at a visitor pass alongside a Chevalier installation pretty much adds up to the same experience: one notices what sets off by the movement of a body that is immersed in a specific environment. In Chevalier's works, therefore, the body is not *represented* because it is itself an integral part thereof.

Of course, this is not the first time in the history of art that an artist has sought to integrate into his work the viewer who is in the process of looking at that work. One thinks of Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), where the painter represented himself in a mirror that has been integrated into the composition, or of Velázquez representing himself in the process of painting in *Las Meninas* (1656), opposite the king and queen, but also facing the viewer. One also thinks of anamorphic art, which calls upon and even demands some movement from the viewer, the most famous example being Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (1533), now in the National Gallery in London, which allows only those who know to move to see the skull that has been painted into the foreground. Starting in the early twentieth century, this quest became more frequent and began heading in extremely varied directions, thereby offering a definitive vindication, once again, of Marcel Duchamp and his aphorism that can today be read as prophetic: "It is the viewer that creates the picture." Since then, that dictum has certainly become hackneyed, worn out through overuse, but it has the genius of putting

into words a large share of the research undertaken during the twentieth century. While it is above all "mentally" that the viewer "creates" the picture (in Leonardo da Vinci's sense of the painting as a *cosa mentale*), he has also begun to do so physically, whether it be in performances involving public participation, in certain works connected with Body Art, in the work of Yves Klein, or with the investigations of the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (G.R.A.V.) and so-called *optical* art, or else in a countless number of creative works done over the past twenty years. In these experiments, which rest on principles that are sometimes far-removed from one another, the roles assigned to the viewer may vary considerably, from the (moral) responsibility imposed on him by Yoko Ono (*Cut Piece*, New York, 1965) to the purely mechanical role Jean Tinguely demanded of him (pushing a button or a pedal to trigger a mechanism or set some gears into motion), and passing by way of mirrors that are held up to him, from Michelangelo Pistoletto to Douglas Gordon, or else through works that basically constitute an "environment" the visitor is invited to travel through, to experiment with, and even to disturb, from Jesús Rafael Soto's Pop Art installations to those of Ann Veronica Janssens today, to take just a few examples. While the viewer's "participation" thus seems to have gradually invaded the sphere of creativity, doing so to the point of helping to define the terms of a "relational aesthetics," according to Nicolas Bourriaud's argument, the few abovementioned examples clearly show the extent to which the nature and meaning of such participation can themselves change.

In Chevalier's work, this presence seems to be connected above all with a desire to produce works that are in movement, ones that have fallen into a half sleep and that require just a movement to unsettle. His *Fractal Flowers* and other more or less attractive plants certainly do not need any viewer in order to germinate, grow, flower, wither, and die: a software program is solely responsible for that, as it generates an "internal" movement, an autonomous principle of growth. In this sense, even though the initial forms are designed by the artist and the programmers who work with him, a portion of the work is basically random in nature, as it depends not only on the generative software programs but also on the presence and movement of viewers. Here again, Chevalier's images bring back to the surface the images of most ancient times--like those ones labeled *acheiropoiētes*, which in Greek means "not made by the hand of man," such images being venerated by the men of the Middle Ages (the most famous one being the Shroud of Turin), for these were very much considered works of art, though produced entirely or in part by the hand of an angel or by that of God. No apparent or hidden divinity is to be found in the gardens of Chevalier, just flowers whose existence is the product of three parameters: the gesture of the artist, the randomness of a software program, and the movement of the viewer. Two of those three parameters thus no longer depend on the artist, once the work is installed. There is undoubtedly to be found in Chevalier's work a bit of the dream of seeing one's creatures escape, and it is perhaps not wholly an accident that the virtual gardens he designs have increasingly become frightful and unruly. Something seems to be saying that he would love to see his flowers take power.