

The plastic mechanics of artificial flowers (and vice versa)

The IFOP figures testify: 36% of French households decorate their home with tissu flowers and plants. Today, the wideness of materials (tissu, silk, velvet, latex, polyfoam) imitating the perfection of nature (better and better) has attracted new younger customers who were before reluctant to the original "plastic" aspect of the product.

Introduction to the 6 pieces of advice about how to sell tissu flowers better.

Dropped in the midst of a machine universe. Fallen into a motorized ambush where arms are stirring, stems are waving, plants –too beautiful to be true- are nodding. Moving wild-eyed through this funny vision that parodies a technique with no complex (in every meanings) which lives with the movement and which seems to talk straight to our connections with the world and the things.

We come in Valère Costes's universe.

His mechanical art is not aggressive, though sometimes disturbing (like, hanging from the ceiling of his studio, this fluffy rabbit's head (that is true, believe it !) which is turning on all its wings flapping). We are closer to the crazy universe of Tim Burton's films or to the dancing machines of Jim Whiting in Herbie Hancock's clip of *Rock it* than to a mechanical version of *Docteur Moreau's island* creatures. I don't know if Valère Costes is a fan of Z series, if he has already seen the very shifted *Return of the Killing Tomatoes* or Ed Wood's films but the state of mind is here. How can we take ourselves seriously lost in such an unbalanced world?

His art doesn't only aim for its own shape, but this shape is already eloquent because it is in reaction against a disarming general context. If this mechanical beast with a metallic frame is penibly crawling on the floor (*Tortue*, 2005), it is not to make the world shocked by the hawksbill turtles' lot in some of the Pacific Ocean seas or everywhere else. If this metallic box is desperately waving its wings (*Pelican*, 1999), it tells nothing about the survival of the fauna after an oil slick or after any other problems caused by the ecosystem. His thought lays on another level: he examines the idea of nature more directly through the prism of a technological world.

The inhabitants of Valère Costes 's art are not spokesmen, they are dissidents who have taken the derision side at the expense of a common and agreed speech . The

question is not so much to take the position to laugh at it as to cry but to consider a future elsewhere. The work evolves in the critical sphere of irony. No sarcasms, just a shift to be able to stand back and to have a new point of view. Irony like the Greek "eirôneia", "action of questioning pretending to be ignorant". And the work, pretending not to know, is pondering about the relationship between technique and nature. There is no univocal face to face, no bulldozers planted in the middle of a tropical forest but plain elements. In Valère Costes's art, the technique is not technical, nature is not really nature. Machines are little more than resembling, not even ersatzes. They could never have been cast for a Canada Dry advertisement because the dissimilarity is so striking. Electric engines, aluminium stems, pumps, wires, pipes and, of course, often in the leading role, plastic plants. These ones, contrary to the mechanic set, are playing on confusion and imitation. When Roland Barthes wrote in 1957 that plastic "is a *turned* substance: whatever state it is, plastic is still powerless to achieve the triumphing smoothness of Nature", he doesn't know the fulgent progress the research laboratories specialized in the ornamental high quality synthetic vegetation industry will do (he simply ignores that the material will deny its own constitution and its creative intelligence to fall in devotion in front of the natural shape). However artificial plants are still "similis" and Valère Costes's formal vocabulary sets out this distance of the natural "models" with the technological ones. On the one hand a denatured nature, and on the other hand an odd low-tech with limited means that are quite effective.

When they are motionless, fixed on a photo, his machines are deceitful angels, they are good as gold. The movement makes them crazy and graceful. There is often a noticing gap between the idea of lightness -or even poetry expressed by their fixed representation- and the clumsiness of their moving reality. Sometimes funny, they can also be touching (to our cost). It is difficult not to be had when you are compassionately watching this pelican in agonies; it is hard not to be affected by this joggling turtle which is desperately trying to move forward. The uncompletion of the machines, the gap they have with their "models" reflects each one to its building and affective elaboration. The works incite us to have an eye turned on ourselves, when, after a while, we escape from our emotion to find reality back, surprised at our own reaction in front of so strange mechanics.

If it puts this personal relationship forward, Valère Costes's art more generally examines the scientific apprehension of nature. And if the machines wander from the idea of

their model, the photos, as for them, make fun of the resemblance. The *Herbiers* series plays on the confusion taking up the method of vegetal species scientific classification. The herbarium tends to rationalize nature by naming each plant with its right name and by conscientiously itemizing it on a label with its Latin name. This classification of nature, chaotic in its essence, shows a relationship with the environment which pleads for a rational ethics. It is this apprehension that the artist's photos show. Taking back these herbarium scientific codes, he takes a photo of an artificial plant on a white background, and, at the top of the picture, he puts its scholarly name - not its species name, but the name of the synthetic material which has been used for its confection. The shape of a plant cast into tetrafluoroethylene or into butadiene styrene acrylonitrile is outstanding (and if sometimes one can be mistaken, it is because of the *natural touch*: "the last innovation that consists in covering the material of the leaves with a thin Teflon layer. The result is astonishing: not only the visual aspect is very realistic but also the touch is natural ²." Valère Costes's art tends to show that some processes, far beyond their own effectiveness, breed a controlled view of the world. Everybody knows each produced action has an impact which is beyond its own function. If there is one noticeable action that can reflect and influence our comprehension of the world, it is the unvarying and incessant production of technological metamorphosis. This production puts us into a bottomless reality in which our universe conception is limited by the use of these obedient artifacts. We have got out of our depth and yet the reality of our environment exists not through the use we make of it but through the experimentation the technique makes of it. Reality is fading away because of the interdependence of man with all his buildings, whatever they are. "The worst", Jean Baudrillard wrote, "is that nature, the natural world is getting residual, insignificant, cluttered and that we don't know how to get rid of it. By creating centralized structures and urban industrial hightech systems, by ruthlessly concentrating the programs, the foundations and the models, we are turning all the rest into scraps, into waste and into useless remnants. By putting the superior functions into orbit, we are changing the planet itself into waste, into a marginal territory, into an outlying space. Building a motorway, a supermarket, a metropolis is automatically changing all its surroundings into a desert. Creating ultra-fast communication networks is immediately changing the human exchange into scraps³. "Valère Costes's work is not a caustic review of this "hyper realistic" functioning of the world, it picks out this distance that more and more parts us from our origins. Like an

attempt to point out the existential consequences of the technological disruption of our time. According to Marshall Mac Luhan “all inventions or technologies are extensions or self amputations of our bodies; and such extensions need the setting up of new connections or a new balance with other organs and with other body extensions. (...) Physiologically, man is constantly modified by his technology in the course of the usual use he makes of it.⁴” If the author analyses here the physical relationship of the impact of technology on man, one must add that these extensions or self-amputations inevitably drag along this shifted comprehension of the world that Valère Costes’s creations seem to describe.

But, as said before, his art has stood back, he is not asserting himself in a Promethean will of progress, he prefers to dodge the issue, getting round the pitfalls of the use or of the productivity for the benefit of a happy idleness. The practical “weakness” of his works fits them in the category of purposeless machines. As onanist mechanics, they generate nothing else than a few movements, for the beauty of the gesture, so to speak. Like *Schtock, schock* (2000), this tempting snake (born from a thought on Genesis) which is constantly biting its tail. A S-shaped wire put on the floor. At one of its end, a little mechanism quickly pulls the wire up and then violently lets it down so that a wave runs through all its length. When the wave finishes its travel, by the same phenomenon, it goes back to the opposite direction. Then the mechanism works again... As a perpetual movement the reptile is condemned to do it again and again: he will never reach (the seventh) heaven. In Valère Costes’s work, invention is not, as Mac Luhan says, the mother of necessities, it is a sterility.

As etymologically as functionally speaking, his machines are everything but robots. When the Czech novelist Karel Kapek uses the term (for the first time), it is associated to the notion of slavery, it means “hard labour”. A purposeless machine doesn’t produce anything, it is naturally lazy, it feigns ignorance and, in this shifted art, it is allowed to have a legitimate glance on the situation.

Even when they are trying to mate, the machines are amused pretences. *Bacchantes: La Transreligieuse* (2004) is a global setting which draws its inspiration from the ancient celebration and more specifically from the cult dedicated to the decadent Bacchus // Dionysus. On an area limited by a blue square of copper sulphate (the substance that wine growers use to protect the vine stocks), the mechanics are moving this way and that to go into an erotic trance. In this strange dancing choreography, the whipping of

a young bunch of grapes is responding to the caress of a vine leaf. The profusion of the machines compensates the unwealth of the means. One after one, the artificial plants are moving, coming up to a delicate as well as mysterious ritual. We cannot see the point of such a pagan dance; it is always surprising to witness an attempt of fruitless sexuality (but yet fruity). It is at that precise moment that we can understand that the meeting with a plastic plant has nothing artificial; the movement of a leaf can have the grace of a caress or the funniness of a sweet powerless foretold disaster. And we remember Heron of Alexandria (125 BC) –considered to be one of the ancestors of the contemporary robotics- with his theatre of stuffed dummies in which Dionysus was making wine spurting out of his crook, while the Bacchantes were frenetically dancing. From the beginning to the end of the chain, it is interesting to notice that it is the pleasures of the body that are occupying the machines. As if the mechanical desire of the flesh was responding to our permanent desincarnation (our self-amputations).

But all this is not serious, this (un)bridled sexuality is aping our behaviour to feel this fading relationship with nature better. Valère Costes's works inevitably invite the human element in his attitudes, his biological rhythms and even in his vital functioning. Sexuality, breathing, heart beatings are links between the mechanical area and the biological area. In all this, it is a question of rhythm, of vital tempo, of movement, of stretching / retraction; the artist enjoys putting this cadence of life in the middle of his work (*Respiration*, 1998; *Souffle chlorophyllien*, 2000; *Partie à trois*, 2000; *Sans titre*, 2005...). The rhythm of the works is the mark of the human's crowding. His machines, even if they are autonomous in the mechanical way, are nevertheless linked to less perceptible references. Man is discreetly showing himself but history and myth too... The pieces of work are connected with Dionysus, with Eden's garden, with the famous Michelangelo's Adam's creation, as many sources to divert, to represent in a different way. Valère Costes's work is naturally allegorical. " Allegorical imagery", Craig Owen writes," is an imagery that people appropriate; the allegorist does not invent images, he confiscates them. He appropriates the cultural signification, poses as its. Interpreter. And in his hands, the image is becoming something else (allos = autre + agoreuei parler) (...) The allegorist adds another meaning to the image. ⁵ " Finally, all Valère Costes's art plays with this cultural meaning confiscation. Once again this interest for the industrial fallow lands, for these shady places, in which the vegetation is little by little getting over the buildings, marks the progressive distancing from an origin. "The allegory, logically, is attracted by the sketchy things, the imperfection, the

uncompleteness – an affinity which finds its more successful expression in ruins that Benjamin describes as the allegorical emblem par excellence. The works of man are absorbed into the landscape and the ruins represent History as an irreversible process of dissolution and of decay, a progressive distancing from the origin.”⁶

By adopting an amused look on reality, Valère Costes's art allows a lucid point of view on an evolving world which drags along new (un)comprehension, new (un)certainities and more generally a slow evaporation of reality. His work is not putting any kinds of progress (technological, ecological) in the dock. It offers imaginary machines which, moving in vain, make us notice that our apprehension of the world is not a comprehension, only just a relation.

Guillaume Mansart