



Neil Beloufa

Jaguacuzzi, 2015

Téléviseurs, caméra, ordinateurs,
système électronique, panneau de
fibres à densité moyenne, résine époxy,
pigments, acier, cuir, fibre de verre,
divers médiums

Televisions, camera, computers,

electronic system, MDF panel, epoxy

resin, pigments, steel, leather,

fiberglass, various mediums

140,97 x 340,36 x 226,06 cm

Court. l'artiste et Balice Hertling, Paris

FROM SCIENCE TO FICTION

JULIEN BÉCOURT

Initially conceived as a laboratory of the digital arts, Le Fresnoy has stimulated the emergence of a whole generation of artists who are engaged in a fertile dialogue with the sciences and technology. Flirting with the codes of science fiction, they are imagining an ecosystem in which humankind has turned into thin air.

Given the sudden technological acceleration of the last twenty years, researchers and philosophers now agree that we have entered the era of the anthropocene. This totally recasts our perception of the world. We are a long way from grasping its full implications, but this fundamental change is affecting not only the way we live, but also all life forms. The alteration of the real by algorithms, which precedes the emergence of singularity, also has the effect of questioning organic forms, which are constantly changing. Never before has the small world of contemporary art been so concerned with the destiny of humanity and of biological substrates, as the imaginary fixes on post-human visions of the biotope that preceded man and that will survive him. Is this a generation thing or the extrapolation of a genuine new paradigm? What relation to the world can arise from this confrontation between the inorganic and the living? How to take up the cause of Nature in the face of transhumanist notions and the *globalitarian* utopia administered by huge conglome-

rates? We are not likely to have any answers before a few decades from now, but there can be little doubt that this penchant for speculative realism, combining materialism and metaphysics, has been bubbling along nicely at Le Fresnoy for the last twenty years.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Disciplinary openness has been the watchword of Le Fresnoy ever since it opened in 1997 as a school promoting the synthesis of performing arts, cinema and science. A hub of what in those days was called multimedia, Le Fresnoy is, in keeping with the wishes of its intellectual father, Alain Fleischer, designed to serve artistic practices that engage with technological developments. Its conception glamorously surrounded with evocations of an "Electronic Bauhaus," a "Hi-tech Villa Medici" or an "Ircam of the visual arts," Le Fresnoy is unique in that its teachers are all renowned artists and filmmakers.

The world of contemporary art still struggles to embrace digital arts, which are generously subsidized by local authorities with a preference for the spectacular. The interactive installations that abounded in the 2000s were vacuous but packed full of sensors and the latest gadgetry; they were playful and therefore accessible to the general public. This tendency certainly had an effect on Le Fresnoy's first three intakes who were often given high-budget, hi-tech commissions for works that, if sometimes ambitious, did not always offer content on the same level.

Julien Bécourt is a writer and critic with a special interest in the gaps between art, cinema, music and counterculture.



Cette page :
 Neil Beloufa
Occidental, 2016
 73 min
 Coproduction Bad Manners / Le Fresnoy
 - Studio national des arts
 contemporains



PSYCHOGEOGRAPHIES

Kaori Kinoshita et Alain Della

Negra

Bonheur académie, 2016

75 min

Twenty years later, Le Fresnoy has nevertheless become a prestigious school, a sign of excellence on a resume. The old fascination with images for image's sake, which resulted in overblown set-ups whose techno-luxuriance barely concealed their emptiness, has given way to a new *modus operandi*. The machinery is still pretty slick, but it knows its place and does not impede the message. The "multimedia years" have receded at last, leaving room for much broader experiments in which technology is not artistic godhead but a simple toolbox.

The work of people like Louidgi Beltrame, Nicolas Moulin and Bertrand Lamarche puts architecture at the center, infusing a sci-fi spirit also cultivated by younger artists such as Arash Nassiri. The glossy images and smooth spaces evoke the psychogeography of future times, with dormitory suburbs juxtaposing skyscrapers and brutalist buildings. The urban and social fabric becomes the support of a dystopian future, built on the ruins of consumer society. By transposing the architectural heritage into an imaginary future, this art redefines globalized geographical space and revives childhood fantasies.

BACK TO MATERIALITY

Curiously, artists at and from Le Fresnoy don't seem much interested in the internet. Maybe touch has become more important to them than the liquidity of flux. Just as content has reasserted itself in relation to container, so the connection with the real has become stronger, and science fiction is increasingly lodged in the interstices of the everyday present rather than projected into the future. Rather than confine digital art to technical prowess, these artists prefer the more poetic potential of post-anthropological or post-archeological art, drawing both on the human sciences and popular culture. Instead of being on the web, the concern is to "get out of the web" in order to explore the weave of a reality lost in the insatiable flux of digital channels. A new semantic field is emerging, reconnecting with the materiality of things, in which the object is no longer conditioned by its use.

Modest materials, lo-tech and system D can be seen here as a form of activism prefiguring the development of fablabs. Making the apparatus evident and subject and object indissociable—such is the challenge for this new generation that is nobody's fool. Leaving the school, most shun the digital spectacle, even if some are still tempted by formal grandiloquence. Reacting against the proliferation of digital effects, but also against conceptual asceticism, this generation is shifting the institution on its axis.

POST-HUMANISM

In seeking to open up the field of the perceptible, the “geochrony” of Cécile Beau, the choreographed performances of Maïder Fortuné and the *bruitist* trances of Joachim Montessuis, founder of the Erratum label, are not without links to modern metaphysical concerns. Technology is not an end in itself, but a tool for liberating possibility, taking us beyond the carnal envelope and revealing a parallel reality. The border between materialism and mysticism is wafer-thin.

With Cécile Beau, the unsayable becomes embodied through sound. Their delicate poetry reminiscent of Arte Povera, her installations reveal the entities at work in nature, a whole other world that exists alongside the human one. Accretions and sediments, particles in suspension and infinitesimal stirrings are sampled from a physical reality at the limits of the discernible. By distilling the sound waves niched in matter—those of a drop or an aspirin, of dust or a pulsar—Beau teaches us to reorient our senses, to focus on the background noise of the universe, from the infinitely small to the infinitely big. And in doing so she reminds us of the micro-history of humanity, that speck of dust that will sooner or later be swallowed up by the cosmos.

The filmmakers/artists Fabien Giraud & Raphael Siboni project themselves into a post-human world where only traces of our civilization remain. Tracing the history of technology, their cycle of videos *The Unmanned* opens in 2045, at the “point of singularity,” with the death of Ray Kurzweil. It continues with other epiphenomena of the industrial revolution, such as the defeat of the chess player Kasparov by the computer Deep Blue in 1997, and the “women calculators” of the 1930s. The artists describe *The Unmanned* “as a temporal experience: it presents a conception of history in which every return into the past is inevitably a transformation of the present, in which any research into the origins of what we are is intrinsically linked to a distancing from what we would be.” In these ontological fictions, the viewpoint does not refer to human measure and the regime of the gaze that it has itself established, but to a technique that has developed outside his subjectivity. “Cinema has nothing to do with representation,” they argue. “It is a point of inflection for the morphology of the world.”

AUGMENTED CINEMA

In the manner of Pierre Huyghe, whose influence it often acknowledges, the young generation of artists moves much more easily from one medium to another than its predecessors. From Anri Sala to Mohammed Bourouissa, the foremost proponents of this “metacinema” have no qualms about deconstructing the narrative and logistic forms characteristic of cinema. The archetypes of the spectacle are undermined, the better to engage with social reality and the tensions it exacerbates. “What interests me,” explains Bourouissa, “is the individual caught up in a mechanism, and the way he or she is perceived by the system. What I do is a kind of anti-monument. I try to reveal a point of view, a gaze on a particular situation.”



Cette page :
 Kaori Kinoshita et Alain Della
 Negra
Les Nouvelles Femmes de Tokyo
 Projet en cours

Reactivating politics via the image seems to be the nodal point of this filmic activism, which has an ambivalent link with the art market.

This inclination for reappropriation is flagrant in the work of Neil Beloufa, whose every video installation fits within another apparatus, as if by a process of communicating vessels. Beloufa voraciously appropriates cinema's modes of production, with the desire to swallow them up rather than deconstruct them. By their satirical excess, combining reality and speculation, his videos deflate postcolonial clichés and their milquetoast philanthropy. In these systems of representation, which, as he puts it, are concerned with "the notions of protocols of work, authority and human relations," everything is placed on the same level. Backstage, accessories, sets, off-camera, actors, assistants, technical team—everything becomes material for production, everything belongs to one and the same cinematic space, to the point that it cannibalizes itself, in the spirit of Mike Kelley's *clusterfuck aesthetics*. It was no doubt in Le Fresnoy (but also at CalArts, where he continued his studies) that Beloufa acquired this capacity to transform the rite of the shoot and projection into a jumble of interlocking forms, images and objects.

Setting more store by protocol, Michaël Sellam unpacks knowledge in formal and conceptual gestures. Since 2005, Sellam has examined the world from the point of view of industrial objects and bestows on them a strange ability to show signs of life, like autonomous organisms. Each of these apparatuses is an experience on the border between psychedelia and scientific coldness, halfway between the visionary raving of Mark Leckey and the cold rigor of Carsten Höller. His researches converge on a certain number of current philosophical questions: What is productivism if it does not obey the logic of causality? What happens to the residues of consumerism if they no longer fulfill a utilitarian function? Overtaken by a technology that it has itself set in motion, is the human destined to become obsolete?

THE PERSISTENCE OF MYTH

If excessive seriousness and formalist emphasis are an imminent pitfall for some Fresnoy artists, others manage to escape by their absurd humor or critical distance. That is the case with Éléonore Saintagnan, whose surrealist fables, mixing documentary and fiction, flourish on the margins of social normalization. Her poetico-absurd verve is propelled by incongruities, awakening the mythological in each of us. This is her very personal way of probing the strangest depths of ordinary humanity, yet without pretending to be an anthropologist.

In the documentaries and video installations they have been making over the last ten years, Alain Della Negra and Kaori Kinoshita have been looking at the utopian communities emerging all round the world, from shamans to furries and the Raelian sect, the subject of a feature film soon on theatrical release. Their vision optimistic and empathetic, the filmmakers avoid post-apocalyptic fatalism and observe these humanist survivals in the tone of bittersweet comedy. The situation is grave, but not desperate.

In an equally nutty manner, the videos made by Bertrand Dezoteux and Benjamin Nuel cause the real to overflow into virtual fiction. Behind the apparent facetiousness of their work, both appeal to the viewer's critical sense in their 3D animations or filmed puppet theater, in which apparent nonchalance goes hand in hand with a reflection on man's place in history. In the nooks of these floating worlds, avatar escapees from Second Life and distorted clones from the history of France or puppet-astronauts setting off for Mars kill time as best they can. These satirical fables ruled by uchronia point up human vanity and the absurdity of existence in a kind of uncanny version of Beckett.

This summer, the exhibition *The Dream of Forms* at the Palais de Tokyo will put a form on the Fresnoy spirit. It will invite visitors to explore the meanders of a post-human landscape, where the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds have dethroned the human species. It is a way of showing that nature, technology, history and community are consubstantial, dealing the final blow to the old anthropocentric refrain.

Translation, C. Penwarden



Michaël Sellam
*Une journée ordinaire (version
psychoacoustique)*, 2013

Deux récepteurs/amplificateurs mono
compatibles CPL Tenor et serveur
Maestro (Soledge), acier, divers
médiums, fichier sonore
130 cm x 76 cm x 60 cm (x 2)
Ph. Luc Jennepin