

Time spirals: from the immemorial to the ephemeral

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The spiral is doubtless the commonest of immemorial ornamental patterns. From the Stone Age to the Chinese urns of the 3rd millennium B.C., from Celtic or Maori motifs to Indian cosmic mandalas, it is one of the paradigms of what Riegl, in his *Questions of Style*, calls the “art will”¹. A spiral combines an abstract perspective with a line of beauty in which pleasure vies with the symbolical. Dynamic and energetic, both open and closed, it is a flux line which flows out into the infinite like an immense eye. Robert Smithson, who created infinite spirals in his drawings and in his installation, *Spiral Jetty*, would have said an “entropic” eye. Whether ancient or modern, a spiral always seems to defy time because it is none other than the image of time: a cosmic flux, a surge, a process, turning in an everlasting cycle. Hence its mystical and geometrical properties. Spire, *spira*: a meander, an arc with several centres. Spirals give rise to irregular alternations, peaks and troughs; entirely vibrant, they seem to combine lifelines and art-lines on the same cosmic plane of immanence. For “such is the nature of the infinite: everything has its own vortex.”

In Pascal Dombis’ impressive exhibition, *Irrational Geometries*, you are immediately caught up, seized by the immense spiral which, from the entrance hall onwards, seems to extend for ever. Amid precise and floating universe-lines, a black and white vortex of an astonishing structural fluidity develops and envelops you in its energy like the eye of a hurricane: a virtual eye, open upon the infinite, unceasingly reflected in the glass of the facing wall. Life in the lines, or in the folds, to quote Henri Michaux, another amateur of rhythms, lines and curves: “curves are a mad jumble of arcs, volutes and infinite lacework” (*Speed and Tempo*).

Here, form is “formation” (*gestaltung*), in line with Klee’s dictum, and as such it testifies to all the different energies possible, including those of flight and nothingness. You are reminded of Gaudi’s wavy façade for the *Pedrera*, and even more so of the architectural spiral from Borromini’s *La Sapienza*, with its void revolving skywards. A spiral is a guided form of wandering, with no symmetry or dominant planes: the line folds and unfolds itself, “soars away or threatens to fall on you”, like Baroque spirals. The element of curvature is an “inflexion” according to Deleuze’s definition of the term: “an inflexion is an ideal or virtual object which can be said to exist in actu only in the soul which envelops it”.² Perhaps that is why, from the study of the Baroque to that of ornament, I have always been enthralled by such curves, rich with the promise of virtual universes. They have always made me dream. I fold and unfold them in my head, since all spirals, being infinite by nature, are essentially mental. And little by little, I have come to feel like Louise Bourgeois’s *Spiral Woman*. This endless “chaotic variety”, with its phases, thresholds, forces and turning points, always suggests images of life and time to me.

¹ Riegl, *Questions de style* (Paris : Hazan) 192.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli* (Paris : Editions de Minuit, 1988) 31.

And yet, if the spiral is an omnipresent motif in human societies, it has also been the object in modern times of a repression that has banned curves, overly feminine, in favour of straight lines, supposedly more masculine. In the Viennese controversy which opposed Klimt and Loos, what was at issue was none other than the entire status of curves and ornament. Is ornament a crime, as Loos suggested, or is it a style, according to the claims of Klimt, the Secession and Art nouveau? The importance of curves is obvious in the golden spirals of Klimt's *The Tree of Life* (from the *Stoclet Frieze*) or in *The Accomplishment*. They link life to feminine eroticism: fluid bodies flirt with ornament as an aesthetic compositional principle.³ When Robert Smithson laid claim to the vortex and spirals of a wounded "entropic" eye, he abandoned modernist dogma in favour of de-centred forms, multiple vanishing points, and endless windings. And quoted Beckett: "Being is the seat of an uninterrupted process of decanting" for this modern Laocoon of "supple and fluid lines".⁴ A fluidity which is also architectural: one thinks of the Tower of Babel, *ziggourats*, complicated mazes, or the spirals of the Guggenheim in New York.

But all these spirals were developed from a sketch-line, a kind of model or diagram of creation. This is no longer the case with Pascal Dombis' works, where abstracts have become virtual, and belong to a non-Euclidian variety of geometry, fractal geometry, in which the part is identical with the whole. Computer programmed by the artist, the immense Vitry spiral is the result of a fractal algorithm, which generates by iteration a million decentred circles. Spiral of spirals, circles of circles, everything is decentred: excess is the rule by which linear and perspectivist vision is disrupted, in favour of an instable multi-vision, where you lose your bearings. But here, the spiral evolves on screens 12 feet high, which replicate it in the form of lines of writing, themselves an abstract landscape. There is a curtain of vertical lines to begin with, and then slowly, or very quickly if you effectuate the interactive mode of the video (a rope), a world of black and multi-coloured curves go by, interconnect and invade the screens. Sometimes straight, sometimes like butterfly wings, the lines proliferate in a deliberate and slightly dizzying asymmetry.

It is precisely this feeling of vertigo and excess which overwhelms you all the way along the immense wall (90 feet) of lines on the first floor. In a variant of "The work of art at the epoch of mechanised reproduction" called "The crisis of painting", Benjamin distinguishes painting, "which projects space in vertical dabs", thereby enticing "the figurative power of the spectator" upwards, from the projective horizontality of drawing, which "reproduces the world so that man may concretely walk in it".⁵ So as you walk along the chromatic wall of post-assembled panels, your horizontally evolving gaze discovers the metamorphosis of these seemingly straight lines, which burst suddenly into fragments of ellipses, like primitive rockets of chance colours blending together in an almost pictorial chromatic mass. In this case "the horizontal line, which draws its magical power from within itself, is that of the enchanted circle (*Bannkreis*)".⁶ Such is the enchantment that the site becomes a non-site and vice versa, according to Smithson's dictum: "Does the Site

³ Vide Buci-Glucksmann, *Philosophie de l'ornement. D'Orient en Occident* (Paris : Galilée, 2008).

⁴ Robert Smithson, *Le Paysage entropique* (Mac, 1994) 191 et sq.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Ecrits français* (Paris : Gallimard, 1991) 190.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 191.

reflect the Non-site (mirror) or is it the contrary?” But with the virtual we go from an abstract perception in a mirror-image to a form of abstraction which is internal to the flux-image. This virtual topography inscribed in the real – the wall and the place – is how the figures and modalities of contemporary time are manifested: slow or extremely swift, technological and transitory, their ambiguities and paradoxes carry you away. This is spatial time in conformity with Nishida’s “*basho* logic”: *basho* is an infinitely inclusive plane, simultaneously “that which is situated inside” and “that which acts”.

Amidst lines, elliptical squalls and circles, the cosmos emerges as an infinite chaosmos whose routes seem to exemplify the immemorial maps of aboriginal spirits: between immobility and motion, masculinity and femininity, purity and impurity. Often close to picture-paintings, maps or murals, Dombis’s systems seem to defy geometrical rationality out of preference for the “irrational geometries” which he himself promotes and programmes, and which sometimes give rise to creative accidents. Here, you are immediately encompassed by an endless universe-line which subtly transforms the site into an aesthetical non-site, and reminds me of Baroque geometries and their anamorphic vision. Organic and inorganic, full of vitality, spirals, like vortices or ellipses, are models of “unstriated space”.⁷ In contrast with Euclidian striated geometrical space, the unstriated space of the sea or the desert is haptic and nomadic. It combines with abstraction, which is precisely “the sentiment of unstriated space”. In the form of ribbons or spirals, the line frenetically engenders a sentiment of vital power similar to the feelings which ocean-waves or sand-dunes provoke in me. Their contemplation makes you lose yourself in them. Life exceeds life in the permanent whirl of an extreme experience made up of rhythmical values and infinite variations.

Now, Pascal Dombis adores the extremes characteristic of a new technological Baroque, and which are no less minimalist for all that. Just as in the *Blink* installation, with Thanos Chrysakis (Art Pool, Budapest, October 2007), uncontrolled visual structures are attained by simply speeding up the video. Devoid of images and decorative motifs, *Blink* provokes subliminal experiences close to what Stern calls “feelings of vitality” of an infantile origin. These concern the power and quality of an experience such as vertigo, the sensation of infinity or the mixture of elation and anxiety. Disorientating from both a visual and auditory perspective, we are made to feel our bodily limits and relive the primordial stages of life.

In other words, if there is an aesthetic of fluidity, it belongs to a time that is not only primordial, but also technological and existential: the flux-time of the ephemeral, the fragile time of “spiralling” return, the time of repetitions and variations. But in contrast with the other spirals of humanity, in this case the ephemeral seems to free itself of the immemorial and to attain a purely temporal modulation of line and image. In the works composed of images taken from the Internet and associated with words (Black/ White, Circle/ Square...), the images create the lines; just as the pictures of letters with their lenticular impositions become

⁷ On the difference between striated and unstriated space, vide G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris : Editions de Minuit, 1980) 606 ss.

ghost images, both conceptual and seductive. What you have there is a whole new temporal art inseparable from a system of images, which I call the flux-image.

Each system of images springs from a particular consciousness of time, influenced by history and technology. Hence, 20th Century modernism found its utopia in what Gilles Deleuze called the crystal-image or time-image. Architectural glass houses, Duchamp's *Grand Verre*, Dan Graham's glass pavilions, Smithson's or Olafur Eliasson's mirror set-ups – in all its edges and reflections, the virtual is a reflexive and self-reflecting system, a crystallisation of temporal planes, of the present and of memory, broadening and transforming perception. In Eliasson's *Seeing Your Self Seeing*, you see yourself seeing, as well as seeing the set-up as if from a window. In relation to this generalised mirroring, the flux-image of the new technologies is without edges, without an inside and an outside, without an original. Flat and yet layered, it is no longer an image of a pre-existing reality: it is productive of reality, and each image can slide under or over another image in infinite superimposition.⁸ Technological in its programming, this digital tissue of images is ephemeral in its modality and effects.

This ephemeral aesthetic was already to be found in the Corsican exhibition at the *Espace d'Art contemporain* of the *Domaine Orenca Gaffory*. Thousands of images covered the surfaces like an illusory second skin, in accompaniment to the key-words of wine: red, rosé or white. Due to a deconstructed binary system and video projections, the excessive number of images combined with the abstract and more conceptual structures of the composition. From a distance, everything seemed to proliferate; close to, you could make out here or there a face, a flower or a car. But the totality went on floating, like the video installations where a ghostly couple emerged from behind a wall of letters and mixed-up words. This “ghostliness” is that of a superimposed dream which takes me back to a world before the Gods of the Scriptures, a world that I experienced in Japan. Shinto animism peopled the world with spectres (*kami*) and supernatural beings (*yokai*) who double the real world with a lovely and terrifying imaginary teratology. Here the wine is woven from its own memory and from all the ecstasies that it provokes.

Between the virtual images and their technological model, a whole network of conceptual translations is established, so that you can “write the code”, as in *Antisana II (Imaging by numbers)*, Chicago) which opens out like a true-false fractal butterfly, a meshing together of lines and spirals, in which a million curves engender a being as airy as it is baroque.

As in contemporary architecture, Pascal Dombis goes about creating numerical tapestries of flux-images, modifying distances and vision in a permanently “floating space”, where a newly-engendered reality vies with the induced ghostliness. This tension dominated the Budapest exhibition, where from a distance everything appeared to shimmer, due to the lenticular panels which covered the images, thereby transforming them. So that the interpretation of these altered images becomes as infinite as their disembodied being. If it is

⁸ Vide C. Buci-Glucksmann, *Esthétique de l'éphémère* (Paris : Galilée, 2003).

still possible to speak, like Duchamp, of mirroring and absolute thinness, what we have here is a Post digital mirror (Art Pool, Budapest), where the lenticular imposition confers a trembling movement to images and text, circle and triangle.

The long history of the projection and metamorphosis of forms stretches from the immemorial – primordial images of hands in caves or Neolithic spirals – to virtual flux-images. To the extent that, coming back to the Vitry exhibition, you cannot help but be struck by the existence of universal ornamental matrices, even if technical and aesthetic compositions are always unique. On the one hand, you have immemorial traces, on the other, ghostly flux-images. But from one to the other there is always a bridge, an interval, which inscribes art in the cosmos, even if it has become a planetary screen. Thus, contemporary art has never ceased to waver between monumental “archaeological” art and an art of the ungraspable and the ephemeral, thereby exploring the two poles of matter: the super-heavy and the ultra-light.

Thus, from 1970 onwards, Robert Morris has been reflecting on the way nature “produces a line”. Before constructing his *Observatories* (1971-77), he worked on caves, the structures of Stonehenge or the gigantic Nazca alignments in Peru (*Alignend with Nazca*). The immense *Observatories* are arranged in curves and circles like all his work in order to introduce time in the form of sculptures. Accumulated on the ground in folds and windings, or arranged in soft Baroque cascades, they are both abstract like lines and carnal like bodies. As he said in 1971, concerning his *Observatories*: “In its essence my work is closer to the architectural compositions of the New Stone Age or of the Orient.” He is fascinated by enclosures, yards, alleys, perspectives and multi-storied structures, all of which are to be found in his labyrinths (*Labyrinth*, 1982) and the stone mazes of his temporary *Documenta* installations (1977).

At the opposite end of the spectrum from this reinvented monumentality, Penone grasps the “virtual” as an immaterial force at work in the natural world. When you sense the forest breathing, when your skin dilates like a plant, when you explore the air with your breath and inhale shadows or the wind, you are wedded to the process, “you are a river”, as he says. Catherine Grenier calls this a “testamentary memory”, one that explores uncertain “image states” between cosmic and human life. But if monumentality lasts by itself, the art of fluidity partakes of the paradox of all that is transitory: “I wanted to eternalise the ephemeral” (Penone). Between the immemorial and the transitory, there is the work of human time, that of art. For if the immemorial is a non-time, a time of origins to be recreated, the ephemeral is simply what passes, the modulation of an evolution to be captured, in its emergence and “opportune moment”, the *kairos* of the Greeks. With the virtual, you may work on the complex and original forms of humanity, as well as exercising a temporal and increasingly global mode of art. For the flux-image is an energy-form, a pathway between somewhere and nowhere, privileging the fluid time of art as it passes in the intervals between worlds. The transfiguration by Pascal Dombis of walls into digital skins and surfaces can also be found in architecture: the tattooing of printed images by Herzog and Meuron, or Greg Lynn’s tactile and biological camouflage. Nor does design fail to reproduce the universal ornamental paradigms; which is tantamount to

saying that the art of fluidity and virtual space-time defines a new system of art, an art of a broader nature, inseparable from the sciences and technologies which program it from now on. Today's image is a process and a strategy, an abstract and a diagram, rife with all kinds of experimentation, between surface and chaos.

This kind of ephemeral experience is no longer a "de-esse" (Lacan), a loss of being and of meaning, as was the melancholy typical of Western culture, from the Greeks to Shakespeare and to the "spleen" of Baudelaire. It accepts time, the topologies of the momentary and "the spirit of the wave", as they say in Japan. It is similar to the unstable and luminous clouds at the horizon of immense skies that Baroque artists liked so much: world states or image states, woven with all the imaginings that haunt us. Those of the past – a face, a smile, a flower – and those of the present: a gigantic eye open upon the void, a radiating eye, which sucks you into its abyss or into its energy. In other words a spiral, the spiral of all the spirals of humanity between microcosm and macrocosm. All those which never ceased to make me dream, from indigenous aesthetics to the artistic and architectural complexities of today, with their topology based on curves, circuits and trajectories. All Pascal Dombis' work derives from the same matrix, where circuits and spirals join together to explore a true heterogenesis of hybridised lines, where one may explore the infinite through its minimal differences.

Perhaps one should try to define the feeling which invades you in the presence of this Virtual which transforms the experience of vision: instead of looking out from yourself, you look out from the world. In spite of what is often said, there is nothing immaterial about such an experience. You can be immersed, sucked in and sized up, as in the virtual eye of the lines and spiral at Vitry. It is a strange feeling, in which the splendour of retrieved appearances, their vibrations and slow or rapid movements, engender a "phenomenology" of an absent reality. There are strata of images, words, accidents, wandering life drives. An equivalent of what Benjamin called "thought-images" as regards Chinese pictures and which deliver an entire "sedimentation of the mind". For with fractal programs, excess never oversteps the law: it is the law, its speed, its infiniteness, its modulation. At heart, yes, Pascal Dombis' work gives me a sensation of the infinite in a world of immanence with its reality and its fictions. A facet or a plane of thought lost in the adventures of unorthodox lines and writings: *RightRong*, according to the title of a lenticular imposition, where the letters appear in the ambiguity of meaning and shadow. And it is precisely this ambiguity specific to the imaginary which "is there" in the developed lines and "not there" in their speed and infinite flight. As if the heights of programmed artifice could join in me with the sense of time. Between presence and absence, between the "there is" and the "there is not", the artistic virtual simply replays the ephemeral nature of a life, in a spiral pathway, made up of bifurcations, breaks and meanders. Michaux again: "The non-temporal is no more hidden by the temporal than the temporal is hidden by the non-temporal. All that is between your hands, the one and the other" (*Angle Posts*).

Translation: Jonathan Pollock