

Plant Machine

Méchain at the confines of the world, Méchain the sentinel posted at liquid frontiers, the remote silhouette of Méchain the semaphore stationed at the brink of the continent . . . Méchain installed, unstable, these fragile pieces of wood.

Pieces of wood? Let us say branches, but no more, for they have so clearly forgotten the very nature of the tree. So much so that they float, unwedded or widowed, with no trunk to bear them, to link them to the generous ground of the Noires Mottes, to secure them firmly against the assault of the wind.

Abandoned, they hover already in the dim clouds that Albion sends their way. Separated from the nourishing earth, they have begun a new life which has led them to stand aloof from the spontaneous principles of plant growth. The very nature of branching, with each branch progressing by repeated divisions towards its extremities, has sunk into oblivion. Atop this last promontory of the motherland, laws seem to recede into the mist, and the slender branches, so weary of reaching to the open sea, curl up and withdraw into themselves.

It is in this paradoxical transformation of the branching structure, of the very form of vegetation as it appears in day-to-day perception, that we can begin to see the great metamorphosis that takes hold of both the branches and the tree. Right under our eyes, they become what François Méchain is not afraid of calling a "plant machine".

But let's not cut corners. Before flirting with the mechanical, our branches slowly but surely abandon the vegetable kingdom. With their curled up endings, they resemble that nimble neuroptera whose buzzing has something mechanical about it, known as the dragonfly in English and as the "*demoiselle*" or the *libellule* in French*. They have ceased to vibrate to the tune of the trees that the coastal gusts keel over. They are already dreaming of soaring like the liberated souls of the wretched of the earth.

The wing form that François Méchain has given them immediately conjures up the installation site. This cliff is charged with aeronautic memories. It witnessed Blériot's take-off and successful landing and it still recalls the repeated attempts by Latham, who flew so well and flew so high but who never made it across the English Channel. Méchain's "plant machine", by its shape and the symbolic import of its wings, belongs to the family of

these mechanical "*demoiselles*" that in bygone days were so dear to the heart of those magnificent flying madmen in their strange machines. Strange indeed is Méchain who, by successive leaps, transforms plant life into an unwedded machine, as if he remembered that Linnaeus' had classified the famous "*demoiselle*" under the evocative name of "*libellula virgo*" (*Syst. nat.* edit. 10, p. 545, n. 17)! In *Territoires*, the wind was already an active presence. But the "effects" of movement were not what Méchain was really seeking, so he quickly banished blurriness and replaced it by solid cords. Informed by the struggle of forces that results from the opposition between flexibility and resistance, these cords constituted the visual equivalents of mechanical concepts.

And so, it from these mountains overlooking Cap Blanc-Nez, facing the sky and England, that this dragonfly, at once plant and machine, will one day take flight. It is already losing ground, to such an extent that François Méchain has arranged the shot that we see at the exhibition so that one of the posts sustaining the structure has disappeared.

From that moment on, the split between the two parts of the photo is seen for what it is. Right away we understand that, far from being accidental, this break has a twin function: to eliminate one of the contacts with the earth thereby liberating the virginal "*demoiselle*" ever more from its terrestrial moorings, and to reinforce the symmetry of the two parts by deconstructing the organic and yielding form that characterizes plant life. The white separating the two panels becomes the hinge where the movements are articulated that will soon enable the transparent mechanism to leave the chthonic gravity of the Noires Mottes.

In the October 3, 1993 entry in his logbook, François Méchain writes that "the site imposes itself, the site is imposing", and on a double-page spread against a background of the English Channel he draws two highly symmetrical arrows pointing to England. The wind and Blériot, the call of space and the enigma of sustentation were all contained in the site and the work responds to this invitation.

This force of site is what gives our contemporary interest in installations all its worth. Between the museum's walls, little will remain of the climate of the moor; the branches will not have the same "atmosphere" as on the cliff top, and this is as it should be. The site is imposing, even if it is a museum. But in the tight network of reversals to which François Méchain beckons us, since once again it is the site that imposes them, our senses will nonetheless be fully alert. This time the branches will hang from the sky, and the English coast will be shadow rather than light.

But the magic will be the same. It will be the magic of plant "*demoiselles*", like the flight of dragonflies through a stream of gladioli.

by Jacques Leenhardt
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translated by Gila Walker

*Translator's note: The French term *libellule* is derived from *libellula virgo* a name that comes from the Latin, *libella* "level", a reference to the insect's horizontal hovering flight and *virgo* "virgin", whence the second French term for the dragonfly, the *demoiselle*, whose equivalent can be found in English for a subspecies of the same order, the damselfly. "*Demoiselle*" was the name that aviation pioneer Alberto Santos-Dumont's gave to his famous 1909 monoplane.