

Inhabiting the Edges

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Abstract

My doctoral project in art-creation-research, which began in October 2021, is entitled "*Imaginal* photography: for an aesthetic of symbiosis." In my practice as a photographic artist, making symbiotic relationships, unexpected alliances, allows me to provoke a "suspension of evidence" which, through the intermediary of the image, invites the viewer to share the experience of a different look. From this point on, the very nature of perception is to admit ambiguity. The interdependencies in ecosystems, the principle of hybridization between different species are themes addressed by the team of the laboratory of plant symbioses of the French National Museum of Natural History of Paris with which I collaborate. In my research, I'm specifically interested in the symbioses present in the orchid with the biologists Florent Martos and Eve Hellequin. Transcending the notion of organism allows us to reconcile human beings with their natural dimension of interdependence and interaction. The researchers in this laboratory are the extractors and curators of natural plant resources, with which they shape new worlds such as the Grande Serre: a space in which I would like to exhibit works in 2023-2024. These hybrid spaces, co-dependent with humans, seem to me to be fertile places to dialogue with.

Keywords

Photography, imaginal, hybridization, symbiosis, speculation, pragmatism, device, articulation

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Introduction

"We inhabit the world from the images we make of it."

This doctoral project starts from the intuition that aesthetics, as a study of sensible knowledge and its artistic productions, is one of the main foundations of the imagination that allows us to think the world and to inhabit it. It is from this imagination that imaginative practice is born. Without the imaginative faculty, a whole area of reality is definitely off-limits to us, lost forever. With the loss of the imaginative faculty, what we risk is not the loss of fiction, but the loss of reality. We run the risk of compartmentalizing the sensible and intelligible worlds, of killing them off slowly, precisely because they only come to life and "come alive" when they are in contact with each other.

Methodology

It seems to me today that the question of representation (of whom speaks and how he or she expresses himself or herself) actually raises the question of the imaginary, that is to say, that of the fabrication of new fictionalities. The issue of imagination is crucial, because it opens up perspectives of therapeutic narratives. These proposals for circulation (in the making itself or in the setting of creations) are multiple hypotheses of resilience. This is why certain fictionalities can be productive of the real and allow us, by this means, to increase ourselves. Their power of augmentation is not only intimate, a creation has an impact when it goes beyond its subject and manages to make language for something else. It's therefore a question of photographing this place with the desire to feel it fully, while knowing that from this precise place we will touch other places, both terrestrial and human.

On the other hand, I'm interested in the interdependencies in ecosystems and the principle of hybridization between species, because I believe that there is a realaesthetic, philosophical and political stake in linking Art (culture in general) to Ecology. The laboratory and the studio are the two places where photographic art was born. Botanical science and in particular the concept of symbiosis seems to me to be able to achieve this necessary alliance (in biology the word symbiosis defines a lasting interspecific interaction of mutual benefit). In this sense, I'm conducting this doctoral research project in collaboration with the team of the plant symbiosis laboratory of the Paris Natural History Museum. I'm specifically interested in the

mycorrhizal symbioses of orchids: those that create networks between individuals and different species, notably between fungi and plant roots. From the concept of symbiosis in biology, I intend to develop the concept of symbiosis in the field of aesthetics: "what could be a symbiotic aesthetic? I propose the hypothesis that a "symbiotic aesthetic" constitutes, on the one hand, a singular way of relating philosophically to the world (at the source of an enlarged perception), and, on the other hand, a programme of plastic realisation. How can symbiosis suspend the rational relationship of things to each other? To what extent does this suspension make it possible to escape from designation and nomination? How can the new representation of the world proposed by symbiosis change the way we act and interact? This project aims to sketch some answers, both formal and textual, based on fieldwork with biologists, both in the field and in the laboratories of the MNHN of Paris.

Communication plan

More specifically, I'd like to present a few recent works produced following a scientific mission to Reunion Island, which fall under what I call a "symbiotic aesthetic." Photographic assemblages are the first satisfactory way I've found of aesthetically translating hybrid identity, through which the intertwining of links manifests itself. Boundary images between the "natural," the imaginary and the technological. Different photographic fragments are linked together by collage. The aesthetic is organic and lively, evoking both art nouveau and virtual reality, where naturalistic photography meets pictorial inventiveness.

Focus of the work

In my work, it's a question of "milieu" in that it takes us in its mesh. It's a question of resisting any hierarchical placement of knowledge and exploring the plurality of deployments that they allow, replacing the aim of unity with the problematic of articulation.

I would like my images to be edges. Let them be meeting zones, spaces of contact, symbiotic and twilight places where the obvious is suspended and where, in a strange familiarity, things enter into relationship. I favour the observation of transitory and symbiotic forms, changes of state, the confusion of scales (from satellite to microscope) and all other forms of telescoping practices, insofar as they impact the

solidity of bodies, the sharpness of contours and the fixity of images. The particular is then the bearer of more than just itself, in that the image is made from an elsewhere that crosses the here, in order to give an account of a here that is both always open and always worried.

"'Border identity' this is the term by which I usually define my own identity. I call it frontier, anchored, not in a place of rupture, but, on the contrary, in a space of permanent coming together. The border, as I define it and inhabit it, is the place where worlds touch, tirelessly. It's the place of constant oscillation: from one space to another, from one sensibility to another, from one worldview to another. It's where languages mingle, not necessarily thunderously, but naturally impregnating each other, to produce, on the blank page, the representation of a composite, hybrid universe."¹

Pace of time and ghosts

We inhabit the world through the images we make of it. In this sense, it would seem that constructing ways of inhabiting the world² also involves ways of making images. In the hollow of my plastic reflections, I apply myself to modelling a specific temporality: that of a time which has a thickness and in which memory and dreams are sedimented.

This time—like thought—is not linear (cause/effect), it is made up of feedback loops where the chain of causality swallows its own tail (systemic thinking). The past is not only what happened, it is also what was dreamed.

"There is always a shadow of something. And it stays for a long time. Now there is only the shadow of my mother, who passed on to me the shadow of my grandmother, etc., etc. You see images projected normally and then you see the same images that become a shadow of themselves. That's what *Maniac Shadows* is all about."³

Uncomfortable landscapes. There is a flaw, a break, a suspension of evidence. We must first remember our heritage, the memory of the rumbling soil, the organisms and ghosts that inhabit us and that we carry, in spite of ourselves, like amnesiac children. This requires, first of all, a refusal of postures or practices that are constituted in a cannibalistic relationship to otherness. This relationship is one of attention, concern and vigilance. The state of vigilance is a state of slowness, of contemplation that stretches over time. It is a profound attention that takes the opposite view of the lighted

time of immediacy to become a space of common sharing. It is a care that we cultivate in the relationship that we maintain with the other whether human or non-human. Taking care of our relationships and their modes of existence goes hand in hand with taking care of the making of our images." The world to which we belong is first and foremost the world we carry within us."⁴



Figure 1. *Identité Frontalière L.M (rupture)*, Mare Longue native forest, Reunion Island, 2023 © Célia Boutillier. Figure 2. *Oeceoclades et ectomycorrhizes*, from the "naturecultureD.H" series, Electronic microscopy technical platform, French National Museum of Natural History, Paris. Assembly of six photographs, format 140 x 139.80 cm © Célia Boutillier

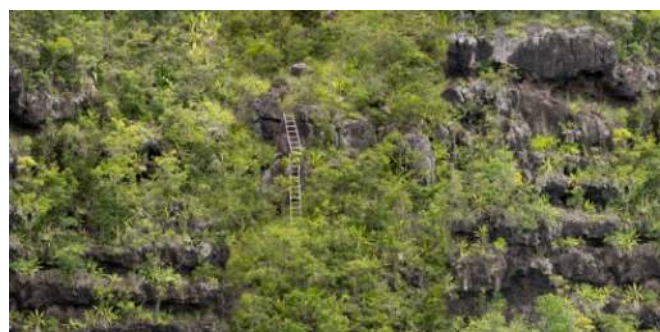


Figure 3. *Échelle Humaine (etépiphytisme sur roches)*, from the "natureculture D.H" series, Mare Longue nativeforest, Reunion Island, 2023. Photographic assemblage, 140 x 70 cm © Célia Boutillier

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Author Biography

After a DNAP at ENSA Dijon (2016), a year at ERG Brussels (2017), a collaboration with LadHyX Polytechnique (2014-2019), Célia Boutilier joins the Beaux-Arts de Paris (2017) to defend a DNSAP (2019). Since 2014 she has been collaborating with research laboratories (microfluidics - Polytechnique, and mycorrhizal symbioses - National Museum of Natural History) where she is interested in how imaging techniques participate in the elaboration of knowledge. Since 2016, her work has been exhibited at fairs and international events, including the National Gallery in Copenhagen, the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris and the Maison des Métallos. It has been quoted in several scientific journals, including *Physics Today*, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*. Since 2020 it has also been included in private collections. In October 2021 Célia Boutilier starts a PhD in "Sciences, Arts, Creation, Research" (SACRe-PSL / ENS) at the National Superior School of Fine Arts in Paris (ENSBA).