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Nous les arbres / Trees

Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris

12 July 2018 – 5 January 2020

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Trees are increasingly becoming a growing presence in our daily life. Whether we are talking about climate change, concerned about the fate of the Amazon rainforest, or considering the ecological benefits of parks, gardens and green squares for the contemporary city, the fate of the planet and humankind is intimately linked to the state of health of the plant world. It is no coincidence that in recent years the role of trees in the urban scene and the different possibilities of their integration in the urban environment have been the focus of scholarly debates and design experiments. These experiments, starting from proposals for a green mimesis of the building's façades, have evolved in projects based on the conservation of biodiversity in cities, increasingly endangered by urban growth. In Mantua, in 2018, the first World Forum on Urban Forest was organized to stimulate a global discussion on the importance of vegetation in the dynamics of urban transformation. The forum established the need to implement design strategies for public and private space that increase the relationships between nature and culture, humans and non-humans, to build a completely new relationship between nature and the city at all scales. And it seems that trees are going to be the major players in this relationship. One of the first—celebrated as much as discussed and criticized—iconic representations of this change in perspective is the Bosco Verticale, designed in Milan by Stefano Boeri. Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia defines Bosco Verticale as 'the most effective embryonic incarnation of this shift: the trees are at once a part of the structure of the towers or skyscrapers—the ultimate symbols of modernity—and their first inhabitants. Returning to trees does not mean abandoning the city, but rather transforming it from within.'¹ Yet the 'vertical forest' is only the first step in Boeri's more ambitious vision of 'urban forestry', the 'ForestMI' project that, in the wake of what is happening in metropolises all over the world from New York to Los Angeles to Shanghai, foresees the placement of 3 million trees in Milan by 2030. Other less recent urban forestry projects proposed different strategies that resulted in interesting and highly effective experiments. In the Metro Forest Project in Bangkok by LAB (Landscape Architects of Bangkok), a new process of reforestation is triggered according to the methods of Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki, based on the theories of vegetation ecology.² The Park am Nordbahnhof in Berlin by Fugmann & Janotta is founded on a design strategy implemented to preserve the vegetation that grew spontaneously on the site following a process of abandonment. Another example is Michel Desvigne's Parc aux Angéliques, which builds on an 'adaptive planning' strategy for

¹ Emanuele Coccia, 'Experiencing the World', in: Pierre-Édouard Couton (ed.), *Trees* (Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 2019), 28.

² Akira Miyawaki, 'Restoration of Urban Green Environments Based on the Theories of Vegetation Ecology', *Ecological Engineering* 11 (1998), 157–165.

the reconfiguration of Bordeaux's urban edge along the Garonne River.³ All projects are aimed at raising awareness of the vital importance of the plant world to the very survival of the animal world.

Recent studies show that trees are a more highly evolved species than animals. In 2005, renown Italian biologist, professor of horticulture and plant physiology Stefano Mancuso created a new branch of science called 'plant neurobiology' and founded the International Laboratory for Plant Neurobiology in Sesto Fiorentino near Florence, where he conducts experiments demonstrating how complex and advanced the vital and relational processes of plant species are. Mancuso's research is complemented by the theories of Emanuele Coccia, philosopher and associate professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. In his recent book *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, Coccia discusses the relationship between man and nature.⁴ The philosopher proposes a new approach to the understanding of the world that undermines the Aristotelian vision and considers life produced by animals and plants necessary for humans, and trees to be the origin and the engines of life on the planet. It is not by chance that both Mancuso and Coccia are among the scientific advisors of the inventive exhibition *Nous les arbres / Trees* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain in Paris, which takes shape from the ingenious theoretical and philosophical assumptions developed by the two scholars.⁵ As the curators of the exhibition explain: 'In resonance with this "plant revolution", the aim of the exhibition *Nous les arbres / Trees* is to invite us to reconsider these enigmatic giants and to teach us to perceive them as important living beings in a shared world.'⁶

The interdisciplinary approach chosen by the curators, Bruce Albert (anthropologist), Hervé Chandès (general director of the Fondation Cartier) and Isabelle Gaudefroy (director of programming for the Fondation Cartier), together with Mancuso and Coccia, construct a lively and varied narrative built around four main aspects related to trees: their biological characteristics, social importance, aesthetics and structure, as well as their devastation by both human intervention and environmental catastrophes. Through the work of artists, architects, scientists, shamans and philosophers, as well as a wide variety of media—from paintings to sculptures, photographs and video installations—the exhibition illustrates a variety of humanistic, scientific and social research on trees.

It is fitting that the exhibition is hosted in the spaces of the Fondation Cartier in Paris. The building itself, designed by Jean Nouvel in the early 1990s, has had a special relationship with trees since its conception. Nouvel's glass box establishes a very strong spatial and visual

³ Michael Koller, 'Adaptive Planning', www.topomagazine.com/adaptive-planning/, accessed 24 October 2019.

⁴ Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018), originally published as *La vita delle piante: Metafisica della mescolanza* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018).

⁵ The original French title of the exhibition is *Nous les arbres*.

⁶ Couton, *Trees*, op. cit. (note 1), 22.

relationship with the surrounding vegetal context and, in particular, with the majestic cedar of Lebanon planted on the site in 1823 by Chateaubriand, which the building encompassed with a profound sense of respect. If Nouvel's Fondation Cartier, where architecture is dematerialized, was conceived to allow visual continuity between exterior and interior, with the *Nous les arbres / Trees* exhibition the transparent shell becomes even more metaphysical as it constructs an intimate dialogue between the vegetation on the outside and the display of its representation inside.⁷

The exhibition is accessed through the garden created in 1992 by German artist Lothar Baumgarten (1944–2018) to complement the building by Nouvel. Named Theatrum Botanicum, in this exhibition on trees the garden itself introduces the visitor to the first theme of the exhibition: the botanical characteristics of trees. As the natural extension of the internal exhibition space, the garden houses the installation *Symbiosa* (2019) by Thijs Biersteker and Stefano Mancuso, a 'calculative data-driven system that estimates the real-time impact that climate change has on nature in Paris, generating a tree ring every second, instead of every year'.⁸ Sensors applied to the trunk transfer the data to a screen where the tree's growth rings and their modifications in relation to the climate and the concentration of CO₂ are represented. The social relevance of trees is exemplified, among other works, by the film *Mon Arbre* (2019) by Raymond Depardon and Claudine Nougaret. The docufilm is a social survey conducted through a series of interviews with residents of small villages in France, who recall their experience and emotional relationship with that very tree that played an important role in their lives—that is, the tree planted in the courtyard of their home, the one dominating the small village square, the isolated tree in a field.

The aesthetic and structure of trees are the focus of the work of art by Luiz Zerbini, who investigates the shape of the trees in his monotypes on paper. Zerbini tells the story of the different species through the monochromatic print of their leaves, enhancing their texture and abstract forms. The aesthetic form of trees is also explored by the eclectic Italian architects Cesare Leonardi and Franca Stagi. Their famous drawings on tracing paper, which make up the series published in the celebrated volume *L'architettura degli alberi*,⁹ are displayed together with a series of photographs—gelatin silver prints and chromogenic prints. Studies on the seasonal colouring of plants, their shade, as well as a model of the famous 'Acentrated Reticular Structure' (ARS) in the 1988 project for Bosco Albergati in Castelfranco Emilia, in Italy, complement the section of the exhibition on aesthetics and form.

The dramatic tale of deforestation is entrusted to the video installation *EXIT, Speechless and Deforestation* (2008–2015) by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Mark Hansen, Laura Kurgan and Ben

⁷ About the relationship between architecture and nature in Jean Nouvel see: Jae-Young Lee, 'The Scenography of Nature in the Work of Jean Nouvel', *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 1 (2018), 68–77; and <https://jardin.fondationcartier.com/en/>, accessed 24 October 2019.

⁸ <https://thijsbiersteker.com/symbiosia2>, accessed 24 October 2019.

⁹ Cesare Leonardi and Franca Stagi, *L'architettura degli alberi* (Milan: Lazy Dog Press, 1983), published in English as *The Architecture of Trees* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2019).

Rubin. Based on an idea by Paul Virilio and commissioned by the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, the installation combines data concerning population shifts, remittances, political refugees, natural disaster and sea-level rise in a series of maps, graphs and diagrams.

The exhibition is accompanied by a rich and lavishly illustrated catalogue, whose contents, however, are not limited to a mere documentation of the event.¹⁰ Titled *Trees* and edited by Pierre-Édouard Couton, the volume opens with a sequence of scholarly essays investigating the topic of the tree in all its complexity from a multidisciplinary point of view: from aesthetics to issues related to neurobiology, from the ecological aspects to the biology and physiology of trees, from an anthropological perspective to even a mathematical approach to the tree structure.

Through a radical approach, the exhibition *Nous les arbres / Trees* focuses on the tree as a living being and important object of study, showing the visitor its core and complexity. The strong and distinct choice of the curators to exhibit works of art that represent only the trees decontextualized from the anthropic environments—there are very few exceptions: the photographs by Sebastià Mejia, for example—is a clear message that highlights the autonomy and superiority of plants compared with humans. The long and fascinating life of trees, well explained in the exhibition, makes mankind's presence on earth appear ephemeral and calls for a new equilibrium of respect for plants. This plea is reiterated throughout the exhibition; statements by philosophers and artists participating in the *Nous les arbres / Trees* exhibition are written on the walls to remind the visitors of the crucial role of trees. The one by Emanuele Coccia that reads 'There is nothing purely human, the vegetal exists in all that is human, and the trees are at the origin of all experience' is particularly evocative. At the end of the pleasant and abundant visit, the visitor leaves the Fondation Cartier with a new perception of trees as the protagonists of our world and our daily lives, raising them to the primary living beings with whom it is necessary to find a new symbiosis that has been lost for some time now.

¹⁰ Couton, *Trees*, op. cit. (note 1).