

# ***Brontosaurus and relateds***

LIGHT ADDITIVE IN ADVANCE OF AN OVER-EXPOSURE

**Laurent Duthion**



# ***Brontosaurus and relateds***

Laurent Duthion

## ***"Faits divers"***

*in conversation with François Quintin*

**François Quintin** : The exhibition in the Camac Art Centre is taking place after an expedition in Antarctic to which you have participated<sup>1</sup>. You were the invited artist for this scientific expedition. Your work is very directly inspired by scientific researches. The few e-mails you sent me from there had the power to make me understand a bit how incredible your exhilaration has been.

The purpose of your work was primarily to take samples of smells like the search for a degree zero. You've probably heard this anecdote about 4'33", the famous silent work by John Cage, saying that it has been supposedly inspired to him by his experience in Harvard in an anechoic room conditioning the absolute silence, where the pulses of his heart beat and the kind of hiss that, he thought, was his nerve impulses (in reality it was probably some tinnitus) revealed to him a state of inner listening, a music which is essential to our attentive conscience and which is searched in an emptiness becoming therefore inhabited. For someone who, like you, has worked on smell for so long, what kind of before-thoughts do you expect about the influence of this trip and what are your expectations for your researches?

**Laurent Duthion** : The work on smell was the defined part of my work on location. Initially I've tried to get information about the possibility to find smells in Dumont d'Urville, on the Antarctic shore. There are no plants and for the human nose the most easily detectable smells are the ones which have an animal origin, one of the most intense being the smell coming from penguins' excrements. It's even quite amazing when you arrive there, even if you need to be quite close from the place where they live to smell it, the intensity of their smell is

really striking, but in the end you get use to it. If one had to create an olfactory image of Dumont d'Urville, this smell would represent the largest part of the blend, a few smells related to the human activity should also be added, and a few less important mineral and maritime odours.

The presence of petrels during the austral summer led me also to the conclusion that smells can be found there, those birds have a very developed sense of smell.

Therefore one can find some very important sources of smell in an environment which is olfactorily poor because it is cold, windy, not very favourable to the development of life and because there is a lot of UV radiations. The striking thing was this strict division of the smell zones within a space which is incidentally odourless, at least for our limited olfactory capacities. I have therefore taken samples from the most intense to the most subtle, like a kind of olfactory gradation. I've also taken samples of submarine smells, like the smell of krill and of several phytoplanktons. The initial idea which led me to work on the smells of the Antarctic was the seeking of a substance which is not easily perceptible, as materially as by thought. I was also motivated by something related to law. Smells are not submitted to rules; they are some of the rare substances that are not affected by the import-export legislation which has been set in order to protect the Antarctic. Neither official documents nor authorisations are needed to take these kinds of samples. You come with your own smells and you go back with some others.

This work about smells was the only planned element of my stay, the rest consisted mainly in understanding what surrounded me thanks to my own observations and in participating to the researches on location, I have in particular followed carefully the ICOTA<sup>2</sup> coastal ichthyology program.

I am very interested by this idea that some of the

elements present in the world such as smells, the molecules of which being analysable, cannot be subjected to legislation. It is therefore possible for some spaces of thought to not be supervised by law.

The lawmakers try of course to do their job about smells. This issue is related to property law and to others options they can use. Juridically speaking, smell cannot be easily considered as a "concrete" thing, it is therefore difficult to legislate about it and the molecular analysis will probably be only applicable to the simplest smells, but it will be of course very difficult to set it into place on a large scale to limit the free movement of smells.

Concerning thought, I can say that it is probably by thinking that one must find and create the out of legislation means and locations where though can have its own expression. Even the most outdated academism contains the germs of its own revolution, the difficulty being always to radically emancipate yourself from what you already know.

The exhibition you're planning will take place very close to a botanic garden, a place where the olfactory complexity is incredible. How do you foresee this transition?

The two locations will be related to a work on the sense of smell or, at least, to the importation within the place of the exhibition of some of their smells but following two different modes. With the staff of the botanic garden of Marnay we're preparing a buffet for the vernissage based on strange plants and flowers. The elements are raw or prepared (sorbetes, salads, foams). The vernissage plays therefore an integral part in my work for this exhibition. But for the Antarctic, which remains less easily accessible unlike the botanic garden which is located next to the art centre, it will be more exclusively an olfactory matter, a mere spray with a

bulb will be available for the visitors<sup>3</sup>. The odour that will be diffused by it will be the only element of this polar presence.

Speaking about smells I remember this work you've realised in 2000, called *Homo Olfactus*<sup>4</sup>, an elastomer mask which covered the eyesight with mist. There was onto it a nose in shape of trumpet allowing to get focused on the perception of smells, including the ones produced by the person wearing it<sup>5</sup>. I think I remember that you said in your presentation that the perception of smells is associated with an aspect of the brain related to our remote ancestors the reptiles<sup>6</sup>. There is often in your work a very special way to reconsider or to question the natural structure of the elements (molecular music<sup>7</sup>, the taste of sugar<sup>8</sup>, the shape of tomatoes<sup>9</sup>...), ,

The interest is probably to find multiple modes in order to grab the "real", or rather of what formulate life and the world into which it evolves. Those things depend on what they are composed of and on our capacity to sense it, to conceptualise it, to think it. In a general way; I'm probably not in the same field that the residues of determinism - astonishingly present in current biology – and in volition of mastery. In the choice of becoming an artist, there is often the desire to make something else than to redo what has already been made, probably by curiosity. Actually, I've chosen to test and to experiment, the questions being things which are more personal, that you ask to yourself. If there is a causality between my production and those questions, it is probably related to the indetermination of my work and to a relative instability.

Your attitude as an artist is well-founded precisely because you do not try to be in accordance with the archetypes of the modern artist. Art is fundamentally undetermined and for me the most interesting idea in

the works based on the scientific experiment, is that the approach could include mistake, excrescence of shape or of meaning, unexpectedness, "serendipity"<sup>10</sup>. What is the place of unexpectedness or uncertainty in your research?

The inventive exploitation of the unexpectedness and the drift of my own researches or of the researches made by others is a form of method which is appropriate to make appear the various slides and the results or excrescences which can seem inappropriate within the initial object. This method is much more satisfying for my curiosity and my desire for unexpectedness than a purist methodology only tied to its initial goal, equalizing all asperities. The small overflows are very interesting for me and the relations between the various knowledge fields that I carry on often contribute to multiply them in a research which tends to become delirious in itself.

In a way, this very large field produces its own serendipity by links and associations which are not against nature but rather non conventional.

The conscious or unconscious mistake has for me a very different role compared to the drift of to the unexpected result, and of course, in the scientific fields it remains an isolated but also a multiple element (demonstration, fraud or failure tools). Personally, I feel very remote from any kind of scientificity and my work in an implicit or explicit collaboration with scientists ranges from the most officially accepted to the most speculative and experimental sectors. For these two latter, among other things, it's the conceptual capacities or the value of the experiment momentarily separated from a strictly reasonable demonstration which interests me.

There is no integration of mistake in my work but I can use it in a way or another. It can be the beginning of a project as it has been the case for the cubic tomato *Paradajz* which was supposed to exist since the 80's because of the clumsiness of a journalist, the idea









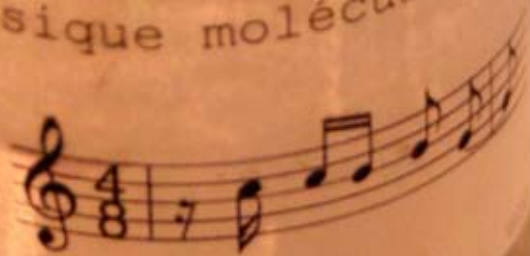








musique moléculaire



urent duthion 2001







behind this project consisting in passing from fiction to reality through the realisation of this oddly shaped vegetable fruit.

But at the beginning of the conception, the interpretative mistake or fraud can also have an exemplary value and operate as a fantastic imaginative stimulus. Palaeontology is very rich in that sense with, for instance, the brontosaurus who during a long period has been considered as one of the most emblematic and one of the heaviest of all dinosaurs but who in reality has never existed, its discovery being only a mix of several skeletons. One can also cite this Chinese palaeontologist who dugged the ground to find fossils he put himself in the soil, the fossils found coming from neglected stocks belonging to the Museum of Beijing. If we consider these anecdotes a little bit more deeply, these mistakes and frauds can be seen as the genuine components of an inventive method.

I would like also to hear you about this amazing bicycle which opens some unexpected prospects of professional reintegration in the world of cinema for Bernard Hinault or Raymond Poulidor or even for the postmen working in the city of Paris.

I've realised *Muscular camera*<sup>11</sup> in 2005 and it has been a little bit improved in 2007 with the help of Cycleurope. As a matter of fact, this is a Bolex H16 camera which has been mounted on a city bicycle in order that its operation and therefore the recorded images depend on the rotation of the front wheel. It's therefore a camera whose framings are made in relation with the leanings and movements of the bicycle and which takes more or less images according to the speed of the bicycle. This bicycle is mostly to be used in the city, the average speed corresponding to the 24 images/second being reached at about 11 or 12 km/hours, that is to say the

average speed of a cyclist in town. Each time the speed is higher than this value, this is transformed, in the film as a slow motion, if it is lower, one will obtain a fast motion when the film is shown.

This camera is available for cyclists-film directors who can be artists, professional cyclists or any other person who want to shoot a film with it. About Parisian postmen, I remember your idea to give this tool to the cycle brigades who deliver mail for a project involving the shooting of films about Paris and I would be pleased if it could be made. I like very much this idea of realising a production tool and to make it available to others.

There's a genuine magic in the shortcuts you manage to set into place, as much with the physical effort of the movement as a motor component of image in movement (precisely) as in the tree whose branches become spoons, pencils or clothes pegs, like the one you show at the Camac<sup>12</sup>. There is a rhetorical form in your work which would erase the world transformations' phases, like doors allowing to pass from a natural state to a compound state of reality?

Yes, it's probably something like that, at least for some of my projects.

I don't feel compelled to poïetic and in a general way if my work is bound to a system, it would be custom-made: each project defines its own mode of production and its propensity to allow its process to be more or less (or not) visible.

For the two mentioned examples, I was probably focused a posteriori on the potential of transformation and production. *Xylocus* are living trees, they continue to grow after my intervention and the purpose of Muscular Camera is above all to make films which will be marked by its mode of operation.

On the other hand, there is a kind of auto-engendering in my work which, at another level can recall the visibility

of a transformation process.

What do you mean? Are you saying that you create systems that you cannot control in their principles?

Yes, I cannot control it, and furthermore, one of my tasks is to organise this absence of control. But what I mean by auto-engendering – which recalls in a way the principle of serendipity – is simply that my works are influenced by each others and that many of my products can appear as phases, studies, tests, attempts related to a forthcoming thing. And there's no relation with an evolution.

*A Hacker Manifesto* by McKenzie Wark<sup>13</sup> has been recently translated in French. He develops a philosophy of computer hacking. For him, it's a way to grasp the world by entering into complex systems by knowing them perfectly. His idea is not to take advantage of it, but to use it for purposes which were not imagined by those systems. I think that you are a hacker of life. What do you think about that?

If I integrate a certain amount of technical and scientific data into my work, rather than the perfect knowledge of the systems, collaboration is one of the essential tools of my diversions. In a way, this is true that my working method has some analogies with this hacking idea in a wider field but without forgetting that my artistic productions are more like a materialised form of thought than an exercise of virtuosity.

In that sense, I accept to be compared to what McKenzie calls a hacker even if it means to hack the hacking.

1 - For the fourth international polar year, the Paul-Emile Victor Polar Institute has launched a request for proposal to send two artists in a scientific base in the Adélie Land. Within this framework, Laurent Duthion has stayed in the Dumont d'Urville and Cap Prud'homme bases during the first three months of the year 2007.

2 - ICOTA is the french acronym for "ichtyologie côtière en Terre Adélie".

3 - *Adélie gas* (2007) is the out of the body and out of context restitution of a smell taken on the Antarctic coast. Work has been carried out with the help of the IFF Company.

4 - *Homo olfactus*, 2000-2001

5 - *Narcistic Homo olfactus*, 2000-2001.

"A version (...) whose length of the nasal appendix has been determined in order that a person with an average flexibility could smell every cm2 of his body.

Laurent Duthion, in *Symétrie de dilatation*, 2001.

6 - "The communicating vessels systems operated by this mask between sight – blurred – and sense of smell – optimised – allow to access in a privileged manner the cerebral zone called rhinencephalic, a trace of our reptilian brain and the hypothetic threshold of genetic memory."

Laurent Duthion, in *Symétrie de dilatation*, 2001.

7 - *Molecular music*, 2001.

"Proteins are made of a group of amino-acids, each one producing a wave of a quantum nature called "scaling waves" by Joël Sternheimer. The twenty existing amino-acids having each a special "vibration", one obtain therefore a genuine musical score which is played at a molecular level and whose frequencies can be transposed as musical notes. The obtained melody stimulates the synthesis of this very protein when the music is played for the organism from which it comes, developing consequently the effect of the molecule on this latter. During his researches Joël Sternheimer has also noticed that the harmony of this protein music could sometime cross the human repertoire. This is particularly the case of *The Apples Song* (a Japanese song which was very popular after WWII) *Love Me Tender* or *O Sole Mio*. The extract where one can hear the title of this napoletanea composed by Di Capua sung among others by Tino Rossi, Dalida, Mario Lanza, Pavarotti, corresponds to the music of the ATP 6 protein of the sunflower which is partly responsible for the production of ATP and which plays therefore a fundamental role in the photosynthesis of this plant.

With the purpose to be consistent with this discovery, the project consists therefore in making drink a popular music at the molecular level in the form of a highly diluted protein solution.

Music for intestines..."

Laurent Duthion, 2001 and 2004.

8 - *Miraculine*, 2006.

*Miraculine* is a powder made with fruits of *Synsepalum dulcificum* which have the property to create taste hallucinations by transforming the acid effect into a sweet taste effect. This product will be available during the vernissage.

9 - *Paradajz*, 2004-2005.

*Paradajz* is a cubic tomato; the first two harvests have been made in 2004-2005.

10 - Serendipity is the exploitation of unexpectedness which, within the framework of a research, drifts us away from something to another thing which was not initially planned. Many discoveries have been made like that.

11 - *Muscular camera*, 2005-2007, Ville de Paris' collection

12 - *Xylocus (portable version)*, 2005-2007.

*Xylocus (portable version)* is a living olive tree. About twenty branches of it have been transformed into ordinary items such as clothes pegs, pencils, pick-up-sticks... following a technique developed in 2004 with the help of an engineer from the ONF.

13 - McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker manifesto*, Harvard University Press , 2004.

## Pictures

- *Adélie gas*, 2007

- *Homo olfactus*, first prototype made in 1999

- *Narcistic Homo olfactus*, 2000 - 2001

- *Paradajz*, 2004 - 2005

- *Molecular music*, 2001

- *Muscular camera*, 2005 - 2007

- *Butinage moléculaire*, detail, 2007

- *Xylocus (portable version)*, detail, 2005 - 2007

This publication has been realised as an additional element for the exhibition *Surexposition* in the Camac art centre.

Laurent Duthion would like to thank François Quintin and the FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Daniel Biro, Nicole Dalmasso and Dominique Favier from IFF, the Paul-Emile Victor Polar Institute also known as IPEV, the International Polar Year, Vincent+Feria, Cycleurope, the FMAC from Paris, the team of the botanical garden of Marnay, the APTH of Nogent-sur-Seine and of course Jean-Yves Coffre and the Camac team and residents.

conception : Montserrat Aguilar et Maria del Mar Cobo

photo : Katalina Quijano, Laurent Duthion, Jean-Yves Coffre

text : François Quintin, Laurent Duthion

June 2007

Pdf english version from the french paper version ISBN 978-2-9527563-2-7

© Laurent Duthion, François Quintin, camac editions, 2007

[www.duthion.net](http://www.duthion.net)

[www.camac.org](http://www.camac.org)

Camac

1 grande rue 10400 Marnay-sur-Seine, France

tel : + 33 (0)325392061





