

Natural extravagance or the extravagance of being a naturalist in the 21st century

His exhibition 'Vegetable Madness' at the Espace Electra in Paris has been a sell-out, his work with Kristian Gavaille in the Marithé and François Girbaud boutique, with Andrée Putman at the Pershing Hall hotel and Jean Nouvel at the Fondation Cartier and Musée du Quai Branly has produced vertical gardens around the French capital and soon around the world.

A passion for plants and the nails on his left hand reaching almost three centimetres: "since

I was a little boy." One cigarette follows another in what is probably the most oxygen rich home in Paris thanks to all the plants: "so long as the first doesn't get in the way of the second..." Green hair is assorted with the nail polish on the nail on his left hand thumb (the longest), silk shirts decorated with botanic motifs and an outlandish collection of shoes don't seem to have been remarked upon at the CNRS research institute: "I have been working with the same team for years, they've got used to it. There has never been any problem." Today, a photographer from Magnum has laid the shoes out in front of the vertical garden in the courtyard; another journalist is there also; there is Pascal, his partner who sang texts by Patrick Blanc at the Espace



Patrick Blanc

Electra on February 14th; we are there too and there are birds fluttering about the room and in the library where the weighty tomes on plants keep watch on the plants creeping up the walls. And only a week ago there was the forest, a tent and the occasional trip to the top of a tree to observe the canopy covering the forest. Extravagant, eccentric, extraordinary, explorer, ex-profeso... Patrick Blanc has all of these qualities... *ex aequo* and balances them all with consummate skill. Or rather, like the plants he so loves, no single interest gets in the way of another despite the apparent difficulties they might have. When he describes the innate capacity plants have at connivance, he is telling also what he has become himself by mimicking them. Indeed his book '*Le bonheur d'être une plante*' ('The happiness of being a plant') published by Maren Sell Editions is the key to understanding him. By adapting to his envi-

ronment and by going in on himself, he is like a plant who can survive without light on the forest floor as it "uses its energy to best advantage to adapt to its surroundings." And if we push the metaphor further, substituting a plant for society, then the implication obtained is all the clearer, because "that same plant if uprooted and placed in a much vaster space with oodles of air and light would become insanely exuberant, and embark on a deadly competitiveness"...

By taking the example of nature, the botanist plays one contrary off another, mixing order with disorder and entangling himself with the process of change that is central to every living entity. Although belonging to a political party would be of no interest to him ("green parties look after anything but the environment"), the wisdom of this lesson on life brings him to fight on the side of ecology in everyday life, "how could it be otherwise?", by proposing solutions for the most polluted of spaces: cities. His "Vertical Gardens" that he has patented, are appearing almost everywhere: a structure in galvanised steel supports a series of alternating layers of non-rotting fibre-based material and a micro-spiked plastic film and so on. Watering occurs by means of "drips" that function on timers; a drain collects the used waters and once filtered these are injected back into the circuit. The price estimate vary but one can count on roughly 500 euros per square metre, which is not exorbitant. Also, the walls can be put up surprisingly fast, sometimes two to three weeks; the one at the Quai Branly Museum took only five weeks.

Each installation aims to be in harmony with its surrounding, it is made especially for it, and could only work in that one place. That said, one of the installations at the Electra space will probably be transferred to the Natural History Museum and for the first time, Patrick Blanc deviates from the principle, "but for a good reason!" Transporting the work will be a challenge but the botanist is happy that it will be donated to the Museum which, together with

the state, supports his research work. He wouldn't consider selling an installation that was already made for another location. Again, following his particular ecological ethics, Patrick Blanc only works with plants that can be found locally in the markets and is quick to say: "My vertical gardens will therefore never appear in kit form". His area of expertise is in fact phyto-geography, "the study of plant whereabouts, their geographic evolution or their isolation." During the conversation, a fear builds up: could there be a "globalisation" of plants? To which he replies: "Most of the plants we know in the west were introduced between 1850 and 1920 and most come from China, Japan and the Himalayas. Some plants can take over when they are not restrained; in some cases, they adapt like the buddleia, but since then there has not been much movement." The richness of textures, colours, surfaces and volumes that he obtains in each composition is so varied that we can easily see why there is no need to go looking elsewhere and that the plants that are available locally are infinitely rich.

As for how to categorize these works and the fascination that they have for both architects and plastic artists, Patrick Blanc remembers: "at the outset it was the contemporary art world that was most interested in vertical gardens. Following the success of the gardens festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire in 1994, it was the Centre for Contemporary art in Albi who first contacted me. Nowadays, it is architects who seem most keen on what I do. But it is only with Jean Nouvel that I have a lot of work on at the moment, a brasserie in Barcelona, a project in Kuala Lumpur and another Ibiza. On a smaller scale the walls become an object, like a design. I am thinking for example of a project for the port of Saigon where the vegetation punctuates the walkways." Some fifty or so projects are underway around the world, including in Philadelphia, Sidney, Hong Kong and Las Vegas. The vertical garden concept is on the move.