

## **Au gré de l'onde: Ukiyo-e as a metaphor for generative art (Abstract)**

Guillaume Rochais, PhD candidate and artist-programmer.  
ACCRA, Université de Strasbourg, France  
e-mail : [guillaume.rochais@gmail.com](mailto:guillaume.rochais@gmail.com)

---



In Japan, the Edo period [1] was marked by the pictorial style of *ukiyo-e*, which mainly refers to woodblock prints, at first monochrome, then soon in color [2]. This talk will highlight the convergences between a personal work entitled “Au gré de l'onde” and *ukiyo-e*, particularly as practiced in the early 19th century.

We will present a series of still images [3] generated by a program written in *Processing* and driven by hydrological data from a river—level, flow, temperature. These images are based on recorded data from the Rhine near Basel. The project will eventually take the form of an animated installation *in situ* and in real time, requiring the installation of a hydrological sensor in the river involved.

Literally meaning “images of the floating world” [4], *ukiyo-e* emphasizes the ephemeral nature of terrestrial life and promotes a light, hedonistic attitude, a definition of which is given by Asai Ryōi in the preface to his *Tales of the Floating World*:

“Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms and the maple leaves, singing songs, drinking wine, and diverting ourselves just in floating, floating, caring not a whit for the pauperism staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along with the river current: this is what we call *ukiyo*.”[5]

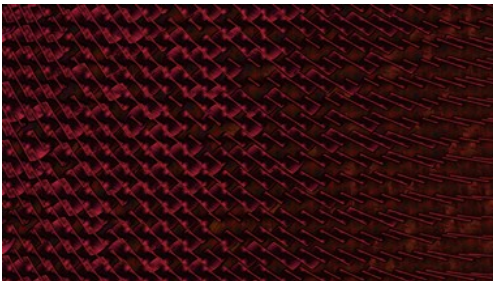
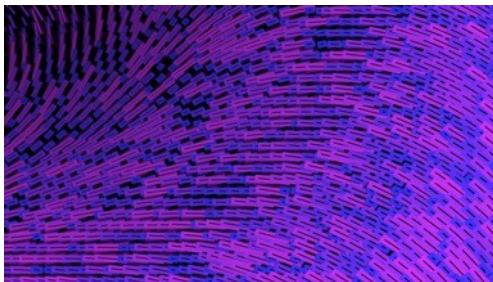
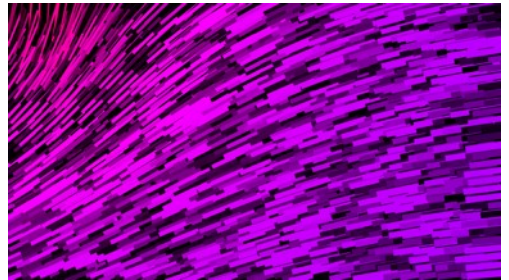
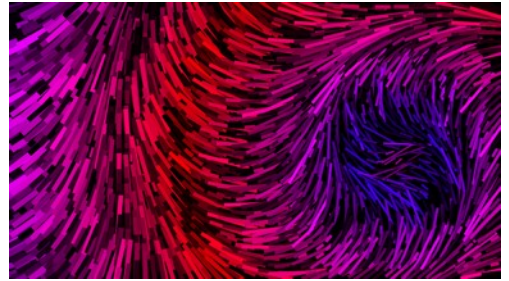
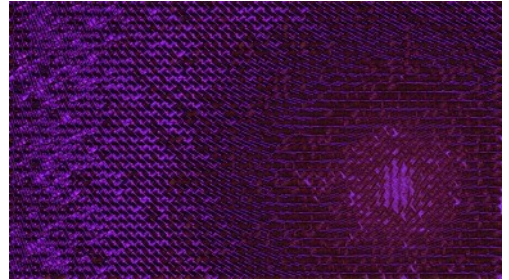
This floating world is envisaged here as a metaphor for the generative program, a process in perpetual evolution, a succession of ephemeral, unseizable moments, which material embodiment eternalizes in the manner of the snapshot constituted by *ukiyo-e*. [6]

Although *ukiyo-e* prints are best known for their representations of everyday life, depicting the pleasures of the city, the genre underwent a revival in the 19th century with the return to favor of landscape painting, of which Hokusai and Hiroshige were two of the leading figures.

The hedonism associated with kabuki and red-light districts was replaced by contemplative pleasure tinged with spirituality: the observation of nature and its eternal recommencements, but also of its destructive power.

This relationship with nature is at the heart of “Au gré de l'onde”, which seeks to extend the river beyond its banks. While the real-time installation delivers a rendering of the forces that animate it, such as the Kami that inhabit it in the Shinto tradition, the extracted still images underline its multiple faces, like Hokusai's *Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji*.

The images presented here will give rise to high-quality digital color prints, echoing the artistic status acquired by *ukiyo-e* in the late 19th century. To recapture the popular and ephemeral dimension of the original *ukiyo-e*, more numerous prints in postcard format are envisaged. In both cases, each copy will be unique to highlight the continually changing character of the generative artwork.



## Notes

[1] This period stretches from 1603 to 1868, i.e. from the beginning of the Tokugawa Ieyasu shogunate to the Meiji Restoration. It takes its name from the city of Edo, now Tokyo, which became the capital of the shogunate.

[2] IWAŌ, Seiichi and al., 1995. *Ukiyo-e. Historical dictionary of Japan* [online]. Tōkyō: Maison franco-japonaise. [Accessed July 28, 2023]. Available from: [https://www.persee.fr/doc/dhjap\\_0000-0000\\_1995\\_dic\\_20\\_1\\_951\\_t1\\_0018\\_000\\_0\\_6](https://www.persee.fr/doc/dhjap_0000-0000_1995_dic_20_1_951_t1_0018_000_0_6)

[3] The images attached to this abstract illustrate the various visual avenues explored, and this work is still under construction. It will be finalized for the final paper..

[4] FRANK, Bernard, 1966. Japanese history and philology. *Annales de l'École pratique des hautes études* [online]. 1966. Vol. 99, no. 1, pp. 485-498. [Accessed September 14, 2023]. Available at:  
[https://www.persee.fr/doc/ephe\\_0000-0001\\_1966\\_num\\_1\\_1\\_5073](https://www.persee.fr/doc/ephe_0000-0001_1966_num_1_1_5073)

[5] Quoted by Richard Lane:  
LANE, Richard, 1957. The Beginnings of The Modern Japanese Novel: Kana-zōshi, 1600–1682. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* [online]. 1957. Vol. 20, no. 3/4, pp. 644–701. [Accessed September 14, 2023]. Available at:  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2718366>

[6] ELISSEEFF, Danielle, [sans date]. Le monde flottant de l'ukiyo-e, la pérennité de l'éphémère. [online]. [Accessed September 14, 2023]. Available at:  
[https://www.clio.fr/bibliotheque/bibliothequeenligne/le\\_monde\\_flottant\\_de\\_lukiyo\\_e\\_la\\_perennite\\_de\\_lephemere.php?letter=A](https://www.clio.fr/bibliotheque/bibliothequeenligne/le_monde_flottant_de_lukiyo_e_la_perennite_de_lephemere.php?letter=A)