They cleaned the beach before we arrived

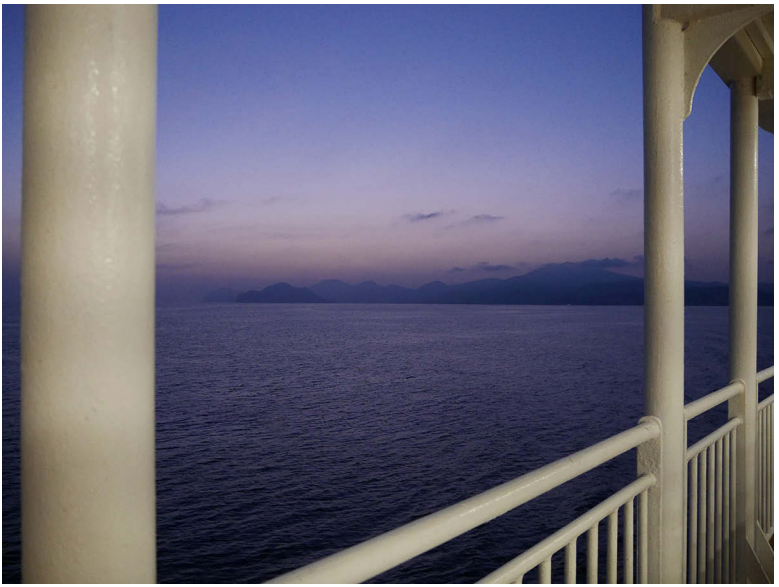
Anne-Laure Franchette

Anne-Laure Franchette has been exploring urban textures and narratives of our contemporary societies through botany, landscape and urban design, and temporary construction structures and sites. Through sculptures and installations as well as photograph and texts, she offers formal visualisations of 'invasive', unwanted and unmapped circulations between the natural and the human worlds, questioning our systems of knowledge, belief and emotion. In the following piece, she reflects on a journey she made to the island of Amorgos, in Greece, where the local environment has been dramatically transformed by human agency. Between the mountainous hinterland and the sandy shores, she looks at the metamorphosis that underlay the present landscape. Behind a 'polished' nature she reveals the tribulations of materials and men that conduce to the present shaping of a land at the crossroads of maritime currents, emblematically captured by the driftwood that is brought back to the land by the sea.

April 2018: From Piraeus, the port of Athens, I left for Amorgos, the easternmost island of the Cyclades, regularly praised for its 'virgin' beauty and 'wild' nature. Filmmaker Luc Besson famously shot scenes of the movie *The Big Blue*[1] here, such as the one featuring the shipwreck of the Olympia, which can still be visited. Despite the rust, the ship's previous name is still visible: Inland. Stories say that the ship was scuppered by pirates.

1 *Le Grand Bleu*, directed by Luc Besson, Neuilly-sur-Seine: Gaumont, 1988.

Fig. 1: Anne-Laure Franchette, ferry view of Amorgos, 2018



Sailing on a ferry, I attempted to dive into Nikos Gatsos's famous poem 'Amorgos', as a sort of preparation. 'Yet the seaweed's eyes are turned toward the sea (...) They say the mountains tremble and the fir-trees rage...'[2] I read it as an epic and surreal lyrical ride, which seemed to be holding some mystical yet unattainable truth.

Interestingly, Gatsos never visited Amorgos. Just as the French poet Arthur Rimbaud had never seen the sea when he wrote his 1871 poem 'Le Bateau ivre' ('The Drunken Boat'). In what seems like a deregulation of the senses, sinking is described as a voluptuous dive into an Edenic world, finally allowing a life 'in the fullness of the great dream'.[3] Similarly, in *The Big Blue*, Jacques, a professional diver, experiences a hallucinatory dream in which the ceiling collapses and the room fills with water. He ultimately decides that he is better off down in the ocean and goes for one final deep dive, to live and die in the divine reality of the subaqueous depths.

2 Nikos Gatsos, 'Amorgos', trans. Edmund Keeley, *Poetry* Vol. 105, no. 1, October 1964, 24 & 26.

3 Arthur Rimbaud, *Lettre du Voyant, à Paul Demeny, 15 mai 1871*.

Fig. 2: Anne-Laure Franchette, Aegiali's beach, 2018

Landing at the port of Aegiali, on the Eastern side of Amorgos, Theodoro, the hotel manager, greeted me with: 'You are lucky, they just cleaned the beach.' It was the very start of the tourist season, and as in many seaside cities, the coastal sand had been covered by dead seaweed during the winter, which made the shore very unappealing for tourists. Walking down to the beach, I mechanically collected a few bits of the seaweed that remained here and there. Looking at them, I started to wonder which botanical, but also symbolic, qualities they might be holding.

Through the ages, seaweed, embodying the living qualities of the sea, has often been thought to possess magical properties. Mythological sea creatures or deities have frequently been represented with seaweed hair or a seaweed crown. As a tool, it has been used to summon some of the entities dwelling in the sea, to conjure storms or to drive away evil spirits. Burning seaweed, whirling it, braiding it or rubbing it against something were some of the ways to activate its magical qualities.

In botanical terms, seaweed, which can be found on many Mediterranean beaches, is the dead leaves of *posidonia oceanica*, which is commonly known as 'Neptune grass'. This endemic seagrass, considered unaesthetic on

beaches, actually helps reduce the erosion of coastlines. Greek municipalities haul away many tonnes every year. Most of it gets buried, while the rest is used as compost or incinerated. Entrepreneurs of the green economy are now looking at seaweed as 'untapped nature', which could be recycled and transformed into an asset, at least for humans.

Fig. 3: Anne-Laure Franchette, driftwood structure in Aegiali, 2018

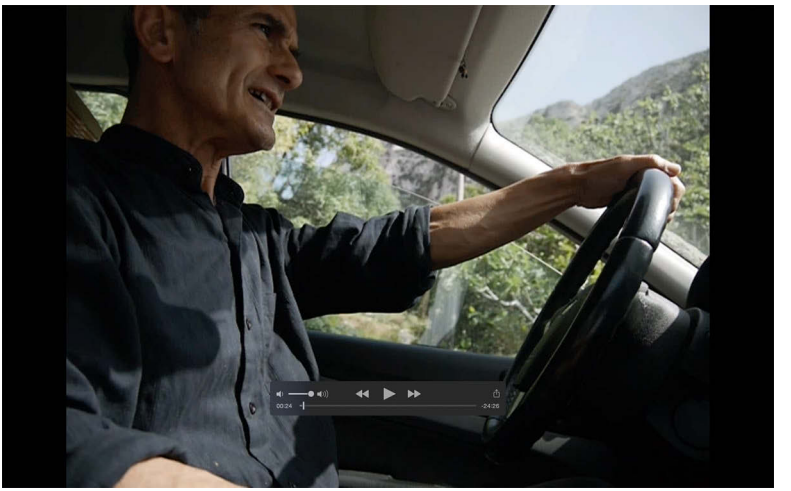
Amorgos is famous for its plants. Not the ones from the sea or the coastline, but those growing inland. The island is often described as a 'herbal paradise'[4] and its unique endemic plant species are widely used for health, beauty, and food purposes. Interestingly, the island is also said to have been covered by a thick forest, earning it the erstwhile nickname *Melania*, the dark one. Nowadays, it is rather hard to visualise such a landscape as the ground is mainly covered by small bushes and flowers. There are hardly any trees.

Vangelis Vassalos, a respected neurophysiologist and local plant expert, harvests, dries, distils, and distributes products made of wild herbs. He

4 Arne Strid and Kit Tan, ed., *Flora Hellenica* (Oberreifenberg: Koeltz Botanical Books, 1997-2014.

often drives around the island offering treatments and prescriptions to his local and foreign customers. During the course of a car ride, we discussed deforestation, limestone,[5] and seaweed. I was especially curious about the stories about *Melania* and the current absence of trees on the island.

Fig. 4: Anne-Laure Franchette, in Vangeli's car, 2018



VV: There are many reasons for the deforestation. One was the need to cultivate land. That's why in the valleys and on the low land, you can see many fields with only one tree. It means that people in the old times cut down all the trees and used it for timber to build houses, boats and a thousand other uses. They cleared the ground and left just one tree, for shade, to rest and eat. We see that in many places. Empty fields for cultivation and one tree, somewhere in the corner. So that was one reason: cultivation, specifically in the low lands.

Now in the mountains, people also needed to cut wood for many reasons. In old times, on the island, people produced the limestone, this whitewash you

5 Limestone is a sedimentary rock composed mainly of skeletal fragments of marine organisms, such as coral and molluscs. It is used as a building material, a component of concrete, an aggregate for roads, a white pigment in toothpaste or paint, a soil conditioner or a popular decorative addition to rock gardens. On Amorgos, and other Greek islands, it is the component behind the whiteness of the buildings.

know. Limestone comes from the earth and to convert it into hydrated limestone, which is the one they then use for the whitewash, they add water and it becomes the milky stuff that they paint the houses with. The walls, everything is white, it comes from the limestone milk. And to make what they took from the earth ready for hydration they needed to build huge ovens using the stone of the limestone and to create very high temperatures, they had to clear big areas of bushes, because they needed a lot of bushes and burning materials, to burn the wood for days. This process converted the limestone into its dehydrated form, so they could make the white milk and paint all the houses. And then there must have been some disasters, maybe some fires in the old times.

Then in the later years, the deforestation was worst because they raised too many goats and sheep. This is an excess of animals. This is also because of a mismanagement on the part of the EU. They supported more the breed of animals and less the agriculture, and people started to breed more and more goats who have been eating everything, all the vegetation of the island. The animals don't let the bushes grow into trees because they keep trimming them. And plus the lack of reforestation. People don't plant trees. As a rule, of course, there are exceptions.[6]

Thinking about the seagrass and seaweed surrounding the island and invading the beaches, I asked Vangelis how the inhabitants of Amorgos had been using these plants, whether they considered them a resource, too, for cooking for example.

> VV: We use seaweed for compost. But for food? We don't know much about it. I am sure it is good for many things, but we don't have the know-how, the knowledge about it. There is so much on the land that we haven't reached the sea. Of course, we get things from the coast, but not seaweed.[7]

It is hard to find historical accounts of the forest, but the construction of ancient buildings, such as the monastery of Hozoviotissa, could be a testament to a large natural wood resource on the island. And it is established that, in 1835, an enormous fire burnt to the ground the forest around Krike-

6 Vangelis Vassalos in conversation with the author, April 2018.

7 Idem.

las, the highest mountain of the island. Today, the only remaining forested area, which counts around five hectares of tall oaks, is located on Mount Papas, a place difficult to access and known mainly to shepherds and hikers. (figure 5)

Fig. 5: Anne-Laure Franchette, Eastern view, 2018

Vangelis was driving to see a patient in Katapola, the second port of the island. He dropped me off by the coast in Aegiali. As I reached the beach, I noticed driftwood lying on the sand. Small branches and planks. And even though it obviously didn't all come from the same tree, it was all of the same very pale colour washed down by the salty water. Erosion and wave action actually makes it difficult to determine the origin of driftwood. It could be the result of natural occurrences, of logging or even of a shipwreck. It suddenly struck me that somehow the trees were coming back to the island – through the back door.

Driftwood is more layered than it looks: it is an ecosystem. Submerged or not, it provides shelter for small animals and organisms. Humans like to use it as decoration, especially to create sceneries in fish tanks. Tutorials on how to make fake driftwood are also popular. But this marine debris has a

fascinating multi-faceted character. Most of the broken wooden debris ending up on the shores is the result of human activity. But driftwood arrives on the human shores as a product of the sea. It, therefore, is a sort of hybrid material, a hinterland coming from the sea, which tells us of other places, and of transformations. Changing form and colour under the effect of water, wind, and sun, driftwood appears as a symbol of life, death, and decay. The remains of a once-living being resurface as washed-out bones, as witnesses and reminders of a tree's dismay.

The driftwood's silent and mysterious return is a reminder of how natural resources are valued, what their commodification and uses represent. This ever-present debris speaks of outside forces, both natural and mechanical, at the intersection where water meets land. Ultimately, we must peel back the layers.

On the last day, I packed many small pieces of driftwood in my suitcase, thinking about the story of the prophetic sea god Glaucus,[8] who becomes immortal after eating a magical herb that could bring dead fish back to life. Enamoured with the nymph Scylla, he declares that his love will not cease before seaweed grows on top of mountains and trees grow into the sea.

8 *Scylla et Glaucus* (1746), five-act tragic opera, by French composer Jean-Marie Leclair.