ROBOTS IN DISTRESS, BOREDOMRESEARCH (VICKY ISLEY & PAUL SMITH)

ROBOTS IN DISTRESS **OR THE REASON OF EMOTIONS IN NON-LIVING ENTITIES**

by Annick Bureaud

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Endlessly, an underwater landscape unfolds on the screen in front of our eyes. Here and there, some metallic poles appear, remains from unknown constructions. Plastic bags and nets are litting the water floor, more and more of them. There is no life. Not a single fish, or shell or aquatic plant. Instead a noria of tiny robots, looking like alien insects that would have been hybridised with an earthian plastic bottle, are stubbornly lifting up and hopelessly falling back down. Upon rising, they emit a blinking red light contrasting with the blueish-grey color of the background environment. The whole scenery is bathed in a sepulchral sound.

Robots In Distress is an Artificial Life (or A.Life) computer-simulated world. When A.Life art emerged around the late 1980's-early1990's with artworks such as Karl Sims's *Panspermia* (1990) or Christa Sommerer & Laurent Mignonneau *Interactive Plant Growing* (1992) or *A-Volve* (1994-95), they were, somehow, celebrating life, even if virtual or unknown ones. They were colorfull and playfull.

Thirty years later *Robots In Distress* expresses a strong rupture: from exploring emergent behaviours and forms of life of the early days, its focus now is on the disappearing of life, the human impact on nature and the failure of our techno-solutions. The artificial creatures (virtual robots) are less interesting by and for themselves than in so far as they reflect upon our responsibility in the disappearance of real creatures, their despondency mirroring our own in elaborating answers.

Human beings have this capacity to develop empathy, even towards things, toward non-living entities, specially if those things have some kind of motion, and even more if this motion seems to have a goal or intention. We project very easily our own intentions not only on our fellow humans but on objects as well.

In his 1994 book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, neurologist Antonio Damasio has shown that without emotions human beings are unable to perform correctly in the world, to have a 'rational' behaviour. Should the robots that we build have emotions then, including negative ones, to be more effective, to help us in implementing solutions? The question is left open.

What is for sure is that there is a strong feeling of melancholia in *Robots In Distress*, of having let the disaster to occur and left it to the robots to do the repairing. But, by their motion and behaviour, they too, show what we interpret as helplessness and hopelessness. And this is this very projection of our human emotions that (may) gives us the strength and the energy to react and take over, perhaps together with a swarm of strongly emotional depressed robots.

Annick Bureaud, November 2017

CREDITS

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