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Interview with Antoine Schmitt

By Jim Andrews

No. 28 – 2003

Jim Andrews: Your work "avec determination" is remarkable in its minimalistic liveliness and autonomy. How long did you work on these works?

Antoine Schmitt: The algorithms behind "avec determination" are quite complex. I designed them for my "Venus #1" piece, in 1998, and it took me about one week to set them up. Then I reused the same algorithms as a basis for the "avec determination" pieces (by adding "determination") as well as the "perls" piece of the "avec tact" series. Each of the "avec determination" then take between one hour and a few hours to create. It really depends on my mood.

What issues were you dealing with in making these works?

The essence of the being with a body. All my work is about why things move (this way), the forces behind the movements, the tension between what is going to happen... In the case of "Avec determination", the tension is between the desire to stand up and the difficulties in doing so, which is both metaphorical and desperately physical.

Is this work that you have applied elsewhere or have future plans concerning taking it further? Is this ongoing work?

"Avec determination" is ongoing work. I create these suffering creatures as a way to take something out of myself. I started the series in 2000 and I made the last one in Feb 2002.

I like your section "About" "Avec determination". Passionate and artistico-philosophical, Antoine! I got the impression that this indicates ongoing work.

I have many themes of exploration going on. The "Avec determination" series, the "nanoensemble series", the "Vexation 1" thread. For all these, I set up a context, and try to push it.

Tell me about your "asFFT" Xtra for Director. When did you make this?

I made it in 1998, for my "Venus #1" piece. I wanted a creature that moved with music, for friends (among whom is Jean-Jacques Birgé, co-author of many of Nicolas Clauss's pieces and some of Frédéric Durieu's pieces) doing a concert, and I wanted the movements to be complex, yet relate to the music. That's when I created both the "asFFT" Xtra and the algorithms to move an articulated body.

I'm always interested in the causes of the movement, and I tackle this subject through many ways. One of them is to give senses to a creature, and have it react to the outside world, and in the case of "Venus #1", to what it hears. In the case of "Venus #1", for which I created the "asFFT", the ear of Venus is directly connected to the muscles, so the sound directly animates the body. The "asFFT" is the ear of "Venus #1".

Are you pleased with your Venus piece and the "asFFT" Xtra in its current state? Are you working further on this or is it finished? What is the aspiration?

I am really fond of "Venus #1". I think that it has its own way of reacting to the music, which makes us listen to music we know in a different way. As the #1 implies, I had the idea to create other creatures on the same concept, but I haven't found the inspiration yet.

How would you describe your main concerns as an artist-programmer?

I stand at the crossing of a practice (programming) and an artistic quest, mostly humanist. I use programming as matter that I mold to create what we call 'plastic' art in french, that is, mainly objects or situations. My main concern is 'the tension between what is going to happen', and programming is a unique way of exploring this field. A program is a huge succession of micro-decisions, and this similarity with the live beings is remarkable, and it is this similarity that I concentrate on.

Are there other works of yours you want to talk about with me?

Much too many ! :-) My latest series, "the nanoensembles", and their friend "the world ensemble" as well as the related 22 cubes ensemble and the nanomachine performance, are really exciting for me these days.

You have put together a great page of links at gratin.org. You seem to follow what is on the web concerning algorithmic art quite closely.

Yes ! This field has become really active lately, and lots of interesting works and theoretic positions take place around it. It is even overhyped in a sense, mainly

because of the mystery of the act of programming (for non-programmers). I try to keep the gratin.org site focused on my main interest, that is systems, simulations, autonomy...

What is gratin.org? Who is in it?

I am centralizing the interesting links that a group of relations forward to me.

Do you and Durieu and Nicolas Clauss talk about your shared interests much?

Actually, even though we meet quite a lot, we don't talk about what we do. We mostly talk about how it is (difficult) to be an artist, or about ongoing contracts...

What other concerns and interests do you share with Durieu, Clauss, servovalve and Jean-Luc Lamarque?

I like Frédéric Durieu's playful objects. I am really fond of Nicolas Clauss's (and Jean-Jacques Birgé's) poetry. I get a lot of inspiration from servovalve's graphic aesthetics. I like also the creative tool aspect and the collaborative approach of Jean-Luc Lamarque's Pianographique.

You all use Director and are artist-programmers. How did this come about?

No idea ! For me, Director is the best tool as it allows me to concentrate on the heart of my work without having to worry about technical details, like portability, graphics displays, sound formats, etc... Director, despite all its flaws, is a great platform for prototyping really fast (from the idea to the object), and for integrating image and sound with algorithms.

Where do you tend to meet?

At our friend's Jean-Jacques Birgé :) He is the one who created the link between most of us.

Do you work with them?

I have worked quite a lot with Jean-Jacques Birgé (Carton, Machiavel), and a few times with servovalve. And some more projects are on the way...

Do you think of this situation as unusual—that you are part of such a talented group of artists that all use the same tool and are web.artists in the same vicinity? It seems very splendid to me.

I think that there are some other unusual groups, in London (around generative.net) or New York (around dorkbot-nyc), or even Paris (betaville, etc...)