

Review on Antoine Schmitt

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1. Wild Animals and Artificial Creatures

Antoine Schmitt introduces his collection of programmed entities in "avec determination" as "silent creatures, struggling against their environment, which we are part of". Thus, he encourages a philosophical perspective in approaching his work, which itself is first of all nothing else than sheer mathematics. The breath and blood of these abstract creatures are a set of mathematical equations which not only determine the creatures' appearance but also their behavior and intentions. Schmitt notes in his introduction:

"I provide the creature with motivation, that is of a force which pilots the muscles and makes it move towards a certain goal. For example, standing up. This motivation, which is also implemented with an algorithm, activates the muscles according to the shift between the goal and the perception that the creature has of its own position and movement (kinesthesis), following a principle known in cybernetics as predictive teleology by negative feedback." (<http://www.gratin.org/as/avecdeetermination>)

Schmitt's creatures realize soon the conflict between their goal to move and the physical constraints of the box. They are stuck in a hopeless situation, reminiscent of Sisyphus' plight. Consider the entity in "Stepping", which is trying to get on its feet and walk.



Stepping

Again and again it smashes its head at the borders, falls onto its knees, but never loses what we infer as its courage or instinct to survive, gets on its feet again only to encounter the same constraints. Schmitt's creatures are doomed to remain in the cage. Instead of conquering new territory they only explore their helplessness. The caged panther described by Rainer Maria Rilke in 1907 comes to mind, who stalks endlessly each day along the bars, which have become his world.

Der Panther

Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe
so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.

Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,
in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht.

Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
sich lautlos auf -. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille -
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.

The Panther

His gaze, going past those bars, has got so misted
with tiredness, it can take in nothing more.
He feels as though a thousand bars existed,
and no more world beyond them than before.

Those supply powerful paddings, turning there
in tiniest of circles, well might be
the dance of forces round a centre where
some mighty will stands paralytically.

Just now and then the pupils' noiseless shutter
is lifted. - Then an image will indart,
down through the limbs' intensive stillness flutter,
and end its being in the heart.

Rilke's Panther was set in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris; Schmitt's entities have been created on a computer somewhere in Paris. However, apart from such accidental, meaningless allusions there may be a deeper relationship between both.

2. Objects and Observers

Both the panther and the programmed entities are confronted with limitations of movement. Yet they experience their limitations differently. Regardless of whether the panther was brought from the wild into the zoo or was born there already, he feels the inappropriateness of this space, which is not the right playground to exercise his muscles but rather only drains them by means of the bars, which contain him. What about Schmitt's artificial creatures? Do we feel that they feel as though they exist in the wrong place? Is their force paralyzed as the panther's is? Not these creatures, but rather those for whom they stand for.

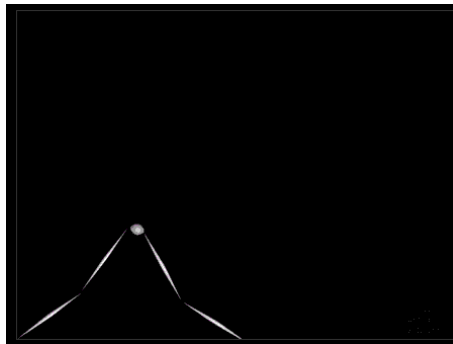
Like Rilke's panther, Schmitt's creatures have the double life of a symbol. They represent what they are: a panther imprisoned in a zoo and a programmed creature caught in a box. They also signify those looking at them, because their viewers have their own bars.

Of course, zoo goers hardly feel trapped watching the panther, which was brought from its life into theirs. Instead, they feel a sense of dominance and enjoy seeing the dangerous creature reduced to a sedate, domesticated object into an equally domesticated part of Jardin des Plantes instead of setting out to track it down in its own realm. The zoo experience substitutes the real experience, as media like books, newspapers, and cinemas do, which, at the time of the poem, already played an important role in presenting the exotic in the safe setting of (visual) consumption. Although this substitution is exactly what zoo goers are comfortable with, it mirrors their own constrained life. They are bound to their fears and social situation, which let them achieve a vicarious experience. The tiny circle, the paralytic will, the tired eyes – they are brothers of their prisoner. Are the visitors of Schmitt's website caught as well?

There is a difference between these website visitors and those visiting the zoo. Whereas the latter cannot influence the situation – if one neglects provoking the panther behind bars with shouts or wild gestures – the former are able to interact with the programmed creatures. We can speed up these creatures' movement, we can direct it to the right, left, top, or bottom, we can smash them against the wall. In contrast to zoo visitors we are not the "helpless spectators" of their endless struggle, as Schmitt suggests in his introduction. He is correct in saying we cannot help this struggle, but only perturb it even more by moving the mouse. However, our interaction, our interference, turns us from mere spectators into a part of the setting. Schmitt himself calls the interaction "only a minimal link between their reality and ours". I consider the link to be far more significant than Schmitt would have us believe, for it puts us into their shoes, so to speak. We are these entities, who are "struggling against their environment, which we are part of," as Schmitt states. We are the panther. As artificial as they are, these creatures tell our story of helplessly trying to leave the box. What, however, is the box?

3. Thinking the Box

There are many things we can relate to this sign. One which comes to mind very easily is the social system. From this perspective, the figure "[Not Moving](#)" may be considered the one which learnt its lesson: it does not aspire to step out. It only looks at us, moving in a very elegant way, and as if to reward its obedience, it cannot be smashed against the wall, neither at the horizontal nor at the vertical level. It is like an example of social education: you will not be hurt anymore once you have learnt to behave within the system, whereas those resisting will be nailed like the last figure in Schmitt's collection (this would be a way to see order in Schmitt's presentation if he would not replace the oldest of his creatures with new ones from time to time).



Not Moving

Departing from the all too simplistic metaphor of the box as symbol for the social system, we may think of the box as language (which finally constitutes the social system) or as software, the language of programming. After all, these creatures in the box are the result of mathematical equations. They are produced by a human being like you and I, with the exception that he or she knows how to write those equations. The programmer is the real father of these creatures, God, who decided to set them in the box as something we can play with. Do we really want these creatures to be freed?

These creatures shall stay in the box as the panther shall stay behind bars. And even so, their presence brings us both pleasure and anxiety for the boxes and bars are never completely safe. The panther on our city streets is equally a nightmare as software roaming on the net. We want both panther and software but we want it under control. Antoine Schmitt makes clear that we do not have this control. His setting of helpless users is meant to point this out and thereby to stress that only he, God the programmer, has control. That he sets the rules is underlined by the fact that our mouse movement to the right or top unexpectedly moves the creatures to

the left or bottom and vice versa. But does the rule maker remain in control of everything?

We are not really sure. There is this experience with nuclear power and there is this fear of genetic manipulation. There is this dread of artificial life and there is this horror of not getting rid anymore of all the ghosts formerly summoned, as is the case in Friedrich Schiller's poem "Der Zauberlehrling" (The Wizard's Apprentice). All these facets of cultural critique can be applied to Schmitt's artificial creatures as we playfully try to free them. Finally we may come to understand: the point is not that we cannot free them for their programmer controls their options; the point is that we desperately hope (or at least should) he really does.

What, after all, is the box again? Besides the cage for those captured in it, the box represents our own limits. Limits in our life, which want the panther in Jardin des Plantes rather than ourselves in the wild, and limits in our undertakings, which let us program things but never ensure the goal. We all experience our limits when we thankfully use the wizard's help to install a new program on our computer. Do not ask me what happens once I click »ok«. Something happens – and I always only hope it will keep the panther within the box.

4. Spectacles and Meaning

Schmitt's "avec determination" pieces are impressive in various ways. One can look at these creatures' movement and attempt to leave the box. One can get involved and try to help them to succeed or just experience one's own power over them. One finally contemplates what this all is supposed to mean.

Thus, Schmitt's project – apart from its visual pleasure and its sophisticated programming – provides semantics behind the surface spectacle. It is an example of software-art – as Lev Manovich describes it in his essay "Generation Flash" –, which is not only well done code work with a flashy screen design and a playful interaction but also conveys a message worth being contemplated. That this message can be taken differently and may never reach its end is what we know and expect from art in contrast to slogans in a manifesto.

Schmitt's piece is enjoyable in several ways. Look at these creatures and their different ways to move – or rather dance – and look how their bodies react differently when they meet the border, try to understand the choreography behind their dance, try to influence it, become friends and imagine them outside the box, in your hard disc for example, and try to smile thinking about that.