Introduction to Antoine Schmitt

By Jim Andrews

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Concerning the programming and creation of online entities, the work of Antoine Schmitt (Paris) is very notable.

"Avec determination" is a minimalist study of lively motion via the programmed. Depending on the mood you catch it in, you might get quite a show.

Schmitt's work is almost down to the code except for the few graphical lines involved. I imagine that there are at least several hundred more lines of code for each of the simple graphical lines. The emphasis here is not so much on software as art.

Once you're finished, read Schmitt's statement about "avec determination". The final paragraph:

> "For each of these creatures, I try to approach a certain essence of being. A mode of being of different quality for each of them. And for this, I concentrate on their dynamics, their movement, on the shapes that take their motivation in their reality. The function of the image is to enable us to apprehend their mode of being. The interaction itself is only a minimal link between their reality and ours. For each of these creatures, its presence, if it manifests itself, derives from a subtle relationship between the motivation and the shapes and forces of the randomness, of the body and of the universe."

He is passionate and devoted to this mixture of philosophy and lively entified art. "Avec determination" was, I believe, done in 2000.

What we see in the above quote, his other writing, and in the work itself is a very articulate presentation of the confluence of programming and art. The philosopher, artist, and programmer/mathematician are all present in Schmitt—a rare combination.

Schmitt is a very knowlegeable programmer. He also has written an Xtra for Director called asFFT (fast fourier transform) that allows Director pieces to respond to sound you play through your computer, whether it's through winamp or your microphone or whatever. You can download and install this Xtra and then try out some of the pieces that use the asFFT Xtra. These include Schmitt's Venus #1 which moves to whatever music you play through your system. There are also links on his site to the work of other people who have used his asFFT Xtra.

On my machine, which is a lowly 400 MHz Pentium II, the synchronization is not instantaneous, but I presume it is on faster machines.

The asFFT Xtra is very intriguing, but the work I have seen, so far, done with it is about as interesting as a lava lamp. Needs work; probably artistic realization versus programming work. The visual reactions are not compelling, dramatic, ensouled.

Oops, no: not *artistic realization versus programming work*. The two are *inextricably fused* in Schmitt's work—that is part of what he is telling us. And it's one of the compelling things about his work. If you think of what it will take to make the thing more lively, you see it has to do with the way the Director piece responds to the sound, and the way it responds to sound is largely a matter of programming as opposed to the particular look of the creature itself, though of course the look of the thing, it's geometry, will be highly related to the code, as he indicates in his <u>statement</u> when he says:

> Once this body and this physical universe are put in place, I give the body muscles, which are forces that act on the elements of the body relatively to each other. These forces are also embodied (implemented) in algorithms acting in the instant, in real time.

You can see the relation between his asFFT project and "Avec determination": both are concerned with lively movement in different ways, and this is a theme that runs through quite a bit of his careful and exciting art and research as an artist-programmer. And this is continuing, ongoing work.

He shares an interest with Durieu in the programmed art entity. Durieu's "<u>Oeil Complex</u>" and his <u>Zoo creatures</u> come to mind. And the motion of these creatures is crucial to their liveliness, the quality of their presence. Schmitt also is interested in that level of detail concerning motion, and in the detail responding through variable programming to the particular situation. It is really only through the detail of movement that the character emerges with any subtlety and power. There is often a friendly rivalry between people with similar concerns who are both high flyers. Is it the case here? Hard to say, perhaps.

Shmitt's aesthetic, as you see, is minimalistic. In this he shares more with <u>servovalve</u> than with Durieu. Durieu and Schmitt are probably equally able concerning programming and engineering. Schmitt worked for NexT at one point as a programmer. But Durieu is more inclined toward the graphical, Schmitt to the schematic or minimally representational. Schmitt writes with philosophical and literary intensity of the sufferer. Durieu is like Wallace Stevens. Le ciel est bleu. The sky is blue. The Emperor of Ice Cream. Durieu seems more influenced poetically by the French lettristes and visual poetry than by, oh, Schoppenhauer, say, or Lacan, or other weighty philosophers whom one images Schmitt having devoured. Durieu's work is lyrical, in a sense, powerful and joyful song, and poetry of the mind with its

amazing mathematical programming structure, whereas Schmitt's is meditation of a different sort, Becketish, Duchampian, but no less informed in programming and maybe even mathematics.

Ideally, they push and inspire each other to greater heights. I would be surprised were it not safe to say that they are two of France's leading intellectual artists. I find them both amazing.

Their programming is in the service of art, of poetry, of synthesis. But also in service of the creation of entities that have their own behaviors, that are semi-autonomous in the sense that they are animisms, silent-running soul devices, machines made out of words reactive to their environments in their own ways. As works of art but also as lively semi-autonomous entities. In this sense, Durieu and Schmitt are realizing the potential of object-oriented programming in a positive way, breathing spirit into what too often is the creation of soulless, frightening weaponry.

It is important to know the difference. Programming and the mathematization of society will continue. It is important to see how the creations of object-oriented programming can be spirited with hope and generous utility for the benefit of humankind. If we understand the difference, if we understand how spirited they can be, we are more likely to be able to recognize the contrary when we see it—and not accept it and demand something with more benefit to humanity, something with more respect in it for us and for human dignity.

Durieu and Schmitt, as with the others in this loosely-knit group, are all producing art for the Web. From Paris. Work of the quality of *all* the members of this group is startling. But artist-intellectuals of Durieu's and Schmitt's order among them is even more outrageous and indicates that we're starting to see some of the finest art in the world on the Web. Not just in this or that isolated individual, but on a larger scale, such as we see in Paris at the moment.

It isn't hard to see that the confluence of arts, media, programming, and mathematics is a strong attractor for interesting minds and creative people. This will continue and, with it, the growth of the art of the Web not only within the art world but for a larger audience.

I look forward to seeing what other entities Schmitt is hatching. His site is gratin.org/as . One may note his generosity via following the abbreviated link: gratin.org; this leads not to Antoine's own work but to a fascinating collection of links "dedicated to the forms of art using algorithms as a first class matter. So actual and yet so classical."
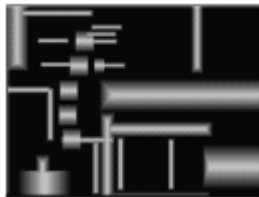
You want passionate high brow French computer art? This is the place.

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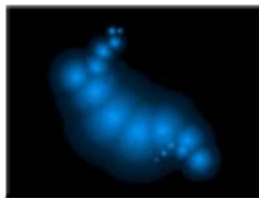
Antoine Schmitt

Avec determination

worldensemble

Venus #1