Humans, animals and robots. Interview to France Cadet

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In her Cyborg manifesto Donna Haraway defines cyborgs as creatures simultaneously animal and machine: both active in the world of social reality and fiction. To what extent do your species of animal-robots question conventional boundaries between animal, human and machine?

I first started to use robotic dogs in my work because they allowed me to embody questions concerning animal rights, and the complex relationship between humans and animals which is central to my work. These questions have evolved over time. At the beginning I was more focused on the boundaries between human and animal, simply using the robots as a medium, then I became interested in using them for their intrinsic robotic qualities, hence questioning the relationships between humans (or animal) and machines.

In Dog[LAB]01, my first installation using I-Cybies, the seven transgenic and chimerical little robotic dogs where used to make a critical social statement about the excess and dangers of cloning, eugenics and other experiments using animals. It also dealt with controversies concerning artists using bio-art as an art form. The modifications of these improbable creatures were based on very real research and experiments done on real animals and demonstrate their possible consequences. Despite the fact that these animals robots are fictitious they still relay a social reality. The robots have the general morphology of a dog (I wanted them to look like pets) but some have bovine coats and horns (mad cow disease?), or pork skin (xenotransplantation? Unless it's a cross with the famous nude mouse?). Barking is transformed into quavering bleats (ESB? Dolly's clone?), or meowing (research for the perfect pet combining cat and dog?). Some have clear jellyfish style bodies, others phosphorescent fur like "GFP Bunny" (Eduardo Kac's famous rabbit which used Green Fluorescent Protein). Another has human ears growing out of its back (Stelarc third ear? TC&A Pig wings project?…) even more surprising is the model with two heads!

With these animal-robots I tried to denounce harmful and excessive use animal experiments, through ironical caricaturization based on very real facts (even though I united different and probably incompatible transformations in the same robot).

I mostly focused on experiments which had had big media coverage so that people could get the reference, even though they were watching tiny transformed robotic toys. These animal-robots could be here considered as a sort of burlesque illustration, an ironic metaphor, an "entertaining" warning against these practices.

The fact that these animals are robots but that they suffer from diseases, or die (in Dog[LAB]02, where a pack of cloned robots like Dolly - the one suffering from BSE and premature aging - are dying in unison), challenges the utopian dreams of transhumanists in which robotic technology was seen as a means of overcoming our mortality.

The installation “Hunting Trophies” directly raises questions about animals rights, but it also introduces new interrogations about domestic robots and robots in general, their status, their function, and their integration into society.

The animals from “Do robotic cats dream of electric fish?” and “Gaude Mihi” are a much more accurate testimony of the breaking down of boundaries between animal, human and machine. Blending into society, robots are now becoming more and more lifelike they now claim to be acting as moral agents! They seem to be developing the ability and desire to experiment with social activities and pleasures. Thus my robotic cat might have the desire to entertain itself by watching pet program on TV, or the rocking robot “Gaude Mihi” (literally *rejoice in myself*) which rocks when its owner approaches, might simply be seeking to generate its own amusement, therefore removing the participation of its owner thus redefining the role of the toy (and the Player). These last two robots tend to create more of a "real" situation and less a metaphor.

In your recent work entitled Hunting trophies eleven robotic animal heads have been mounted onto a wall as in traditional trophy displays. What is the significance behind the number eleven?

There is no particular signification behind the number eleven. I just wanted to build a dozen or so trophies, but I needed an odd number in order to hang them onto the wall in two staggered lines, with the deer-like species, which are more proud, above arrogantly gazing down at you and the cat-like species which are more aggressive, below, looking you straight in the eye.

What qualities do you think animation versus static display lends to your work?

The “Hunting Trophies” installation has a more traditional and sculptural aspect than my previous installations involving moving robots. For someone who discovers the installation, there’s nothing that allows them to predict that these sculptures have the ability to move and react. These cut-in-half robots seem irremediably still. It’s only when you approach to observe the details of each animal that they come to life. Compared to a traditional static installation, the effect of surprise is fundamental and an inherent robotic feature, and compared to other, previous installations, this effect is greater than when people look at single isolated autonomous robot which is already in motion when they approach. Even thought these trophies are hung onto the wall and cannot jump at us, the fact that they are placed at eye level exaggerates their aggressive appearance. They stare at us menacingly whereas the other animals-robots are placed low, below the spectator, and tend to seem to be suffering or subordinate. They look more cute and not as dangerous and as a result the audience's reaction is different, people have more compassion for these poor animals, they probably feel superior, a protector, whereas they tend to feel uncomfortable and possibly disturbed by a wall hung with trophies which stare back at you.

Your hunting trophies seem to ironically defy Descartes’ notion of animal as machine unable to experience pain; they protest even in death to the injustices suffered by their killing. Akira Mizuta Lippit promotes

the idea of a third form of life – a technological life or a non-organic life in which the continued existence of the animal can be assured and even repeated. Do you regard your robotic animals as a new and unique species of wildlife metaphors? If so, what sort of spaces do y ou think they can occupy?

We first tried to compare the animal with a machine. Then Descartes' idea of "Animal-Machine" was ousted by the idea of a pain-feeling animal (Peter Singer), then by the idea that an animal could be the subject of moral concern, thus blurring the boundaries between human and animal. Simultaneously machines became more and more life-like and are considered by certain people today, to be capable of acting as moral agents too. We observe that these notions are merging and that we are moving towards Donna Haraway's model of modern science in which the distinctions between natural and artificial are completely restructured and the boundaries between nature and culture, animal or human and machine have become permeable.

The animals from "Hunting Trophies" are a possible metaphor of these new life forms. They assemble recognizable characteristics from existing species, mainly felines (lion, tiger, leopard, lynx) and cervidae (deer, moose, antelope, impala) which are found in traditional hunting trophies. On the other hand they have generic characteristics, a shiny skin and the same size as if they all belonged to the same species. They seem to be normalized, their biodiversity and taxonomic ranks & boundaries erased occulting notions of species, genus, family, order, class… and life. The standardization of our future natural world implies new life forms and more or less a unique species of wildlife. But my robots also embody the fact that most of the machines that we are creating refer to a natural model, or should I say to our *vision and interpretation* of nature, and even more to our *desire* of what nature should be. Even with the latest generations of self learning and adaptive machines, we observe that the result is generally a mimic of natural pre-existing behaviour. In the field of robotics, the use of animal-like forms might be an obvious reason. Particular embodiments, considered as *experimental variables* (i.e. Kaplan & Oudeyer), shape the robot's behaviour and its longer-term developmental patterns (i.e. legged robots locomotion, Aibo experiments, COG from Rodney Brooks..). Even the algorithms behind the concept of "artificial curiosity" in robotics - a sort of abstract motivation based on a form of curiosity where the robots search for situations in which they experience some sort of progress - are an artificial reproduction of a natural behaviour. I feel that it is impossible for us to escape from this anthropomorphic vision, which is why my animals refer to existing, emblematic species & tradition.

However, I assume and I hope that in the future things won't be so caricatural. We have reached the posthuman step and it is also possible to consider, like Bostrom, that animal and human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development, but rather its beginning…

Do your animals have gender specific traits or are they beyond gender in the post-human meaning of the word?

With the contraception and the in vitro fertilization, the female body has been freed from the biological destiny of procreation. Genetic engineering and cloning are now reinforcing this dichotomy between human sex and procreation, between gender and its cultural and social role. The physical bounds of gender stretch the limits of Mother Nature. Still referring to Donna Haraway's vision of cyborg, in this post-human world, biological or natural gender no longer determines the cultural and social roles of a person. Although my robots have characteristics

referring to the natural world, they don't have specific gender traits so yes, I guess you could say they have gone beyond gender.

Their shiny, pristine finish strongly contrast with Steve Baker's notion of the botched taxidermied animal so central to the conception of the postmodern animal. Instead they elicit associations with toys, cartoons and cinematic animations – forever perfect and desirable. To what extent do the trophies share characteristics with the original meaning of the word ' trophy '?

Most of my artworks tackle serious problems but in an ironic and ludic way: funny toys, pleasant games, charming pets, cute machines, sweet robots… I usually seek to build easy recognizable objects or machines and use familiar subject matters in order to rapidly engage an exchange with the audience. These robots provide me once again with scope for a new critical social comment about animal rights, in this case hunting. They are here considered as a sort of burlesque illustration, an ironic allegory. Parody. I am conscious that these shiny robots refer more to toys and puppets that to genuine hunting trophies and that they are far away from the idea of *botched taxidermy* that Steve Baker describes in his book "The Postmodern Animal" but I am precisely interested in this paradoxical and self-contradictory use of robots – something new symbolizing cutting edge interactive technology – used here for the representation of hunting trophies something old and traditional symbolizing death.

I intentionally worked with the design of cute Japanese-looking robots also because this installation raises questions about domesticity and robots in general, about their quality, their function and their integration into society.

One might ask: Are they different robot's species? How many? Are there rare species? Facing extinction? How are they classified? Are they the testimony of a future world where androids would be facing extinction? Like Frédéric Kaplan in his book: "Machines apprivoisées" (tamed machines), we might also ask ourselves about the place that these strange creatures could have one day in our society. But also… Can we kill robots? With more impunity than animals? Which ones have and will have more value? More respect? More rights? And maybe just.. how can we kill a machine?

All these interrogations about robots are similar to the ones we could pose about animals while watching traditional hunting trophies. These trophies can be seen as a memento of those endangered *animals* and those *species* which have *vanished, but also as* a token of human victory over technology, a symbolic robotics achievement.

France Cadet is a French Artist born in 1971 whose work raises questions about various aspects in science debates: danger of possible accidents, observation of animal and human behaviour, artificialisation of life, side effects of cloning... She has run several robotics courses for many years now and teaches robotics at Fine-Arts School of Aix-en Provence. She first studied sciences before coming to fine arts. Her work meets those two interests. She had shows in Tokyo, ARS Electronica Linz, Lille2004, ARCO 04, Roger Pailhas gallery, La Vilette and Palais de Tokyo. She was awarded the VIDA 6.0 competition in Madrid (1st Prize) and Digital Stadium Awards in Tokyo (1st Prize). MEIAC, the Badajoz contemporary art museum, Spain, bought from her a robotic piece.

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