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Psalms

Phillips, M

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Donald Rodney: PSALMS.

Apart from the faint clicking of ultrasonic sensors, the occasional clunk of motors engaging, and the random squeak of rubber tyres on polished gallery floors, Psalms slowly and silently performs its graceful, predefined figure of 8. It would do this forever until interrupted by a gallery visitor standing in its path, and then, politely it stops and manoeuvres around the obstacle to renegotiate its trajectory. Only then does the obstacle, more used to looking at stationary objects on walls and plinths, realise they are in the way, oblivious of the performance of this empty autonomous wheelchair defining a space where the artist once was - an algorithm of absence.

Charmingly coerced into the 'Donald Rodney PLC whilst sharing a studio at the Slade, I helped Donald with several projects - most notably *Visceral Canker* (1990), with its peristaltic pumps and electronics, for the TSWA Four Cities Project, now in the Tate Collection - and posthumously on the algorithmic work *donald.rodney:autoicon v1.0*. But for Psalms I was more of a translator, and latterly, a caretaker. i-DAT.org, the research group I lead at the University of Plymouth, was rooted in the computational shenanigans of AI and Robotics researchers, after discussing Donald's early imaginings for Psalms I introduced him to Guido Bugmann, who, with his student Kheng Lee Koay, developed a new type of Neural Network to drive the digitally enhanced wheelchair in accordance with Donald's vision.

Psalms typifies Donald's boundary-fluid artwork, simultaneously political, experimental, and unclassifiable. His works gave meaning to the field of BioArt and the creative use of Artificial Intelligence at the end of the last century - and are consequently a conservator's nightmare. The Estate of Donald G Rodney, driven by Donald's partner, Diane Symons and the artist Keith Piper, have protected these artworks over the years. Securing more traditional items has been a breeze compared to the trauma of his cantankerous electronic assemblages. Even *Visceral Canker's* perishing electronics has been a doddle compared to the maintenance of Psalms which ran the risk of being a *Ship of Theseus* of upgrades of electronics and antediluvian computers. But then Theseus didn't have a Neural Net to navigate by or indeed the support of the Tate Time-based Media Conservation unit to sensitively preserve the work in a displayable form, even if it will always be an immaterial algorithmic behaviour at its core, Donald, through his absence, is very tangibly present.

Mike Phillips 15/04/2024.