HOËL DURET
RIVERS OF GOLD

"*SKY©*, a conversational chatbot company, develops avatars that are capable of independently replacing you in visio-meetings, answering your calls, and replying to your texts and emails. But what do they do when you're not using them?
The installation *Rivers of Gold* features four avatars deserted by their *User*. This unusual downtime, a disruption of their productivist tasks, forces them to question their condition. If their *User* is gone for good and *SKY©* keeps refusing their calls, the four bots might be stuck in this existential limbo forever.
On the ground floor, *Bear*, *Hawk* and *Owl* debate their situation, while *Lion* lingers in the basement, his phone charging on the wall. Listening to *SKY©*'s music-on-hold, he hopes someone will pick up."

At any rate, this is the way the author, Hoël Duret, introduces "on his networks" his solo exhibition at the New Galerie: *Rivers of Gold.* The presence of the four characters, their dialogue in the presence of the viewer, prompts one to refer to the field of theater; to see in this incipit the warning of this morality play. The artist (conveniently?) forgets to mention a final work in the exhibition, which the viewer accesses by stepping behind a curtain in the last room of the gallery's basement.

In this video - *Drop Out* - we discover the same four anthropomorphized characters (*Hawk*, *Bear*, *Lion* and *Owl*) commenting, facing the camera, in the New Zealand jungle, on a plot that seems to revolve around the imminent arrival of tech moguls in modernist bunkers meant to isolate them from a global ecological or epidemiological catastrophe. In this video, the animal protagonists are 2D Instagram filters (masks), created by an obscure Japanese independent digital purveyor who has since disappeared (although he has announced the launch of his own company).

It's a fresh new role for the four companions, the four DIY forest spirits from *Drop Out*. Now turned into holograms, augmented by mannequins and dressed in kid's clothes, they reflect on their role as chatbots abandoned by their users and by the company that created (coded) them. Their dialogue borrows from small talk, tinged with a helplessness and expectation that the viewer assigns to them, postulating their obsolescence - which has become a technological, economic and societal commonplace.

Despite this obsolescence (or because of it?), the protagonists summon up snippets of well-informed explanation: *Owl* (quasi-consenting) evokes the necessary creative destruction of Schumpeterian capitalism, *Hawk* (accusatory) brings up the society of the spectacle and its counterpart of neural resilience theorized by Donald Hebb, *Bear* (dejected) launches into a *lamento* not unlike Shylock's pleading. *Lion* says nothing, trying to contact "someone" on the phone - someone his own creation has surely replaced.

This theme of obsolescence, combined with the disempowerment caused by a distant corporation with the power of life and death, is a science-fiction trope that is becoming more and more commonplace, more and more routine. And every reaction, every statement in response, is assigned to a new kind of marketplace of ideas, whose resolution moves away from John Stuart Mill's fair competition to the dystopian Darwinism of Elon Musk. Where every assertion is made on a vague forum, where the AIs themselves are idle. Where the style of the theater of the absurd becomes a simple meme.
Or we might see in this staging a reiteration by the author of the Mechanical Turk, a supposedly autonomous 18th-century chess-playing automaton, animated in fact by a concealed human.
Mechanical Turk© is today a branch of Amazon, which outsources to humans repetitive tasks that it is not profitable to automate...

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