

Idle Knights

Solo exhibition by Isabelle Andriessen

March 10 – April 16 2022

Excavator

The vessel looks something like the rib-cage of a giant. A long bowed hull, pointed at each end, flanked on both sides by jagged looking spears curving below like a claw. But where there would be a palm, or a paw, there is only a needle of latticed processing power.

Its obscene mass glides through unpopulated space towards yet another system. It is old, very old. It has been warped by magnetar bursts and peppered by stray neutrinos.

It blots out a distant dwindling sun while searching for another spot to trawl. It is scanning. As long as it has fuel it is scanning for statistical peculiarities.

It is automated, no life on board, or nothing warm and breathing anyway. Nothing feeding and defecating. Bits of highly compact crystal grind out calculations. Data drifts in.

It enters the next system. It moves towards a planet not so far from its red giant.

It places itself in high orbit. The world below is mostly desert, the surface seems to twitch with faint traces of nearly extinct storm systems. Or maybe it is a visual malfunction.

The ship begins its work dropping probes like spores from a cap searching for soft wet earth. Scanning for the cracked surfaces, looking for the geographical features as joints to cut.

Generators spin up, power flow shifts from propulsion to the digger. The ship begins to burn a massive ring into the surface of the planet. Taking readings from the contact between the beam and the inorganic crust: chemical, physical, geological.

No surprises as the hulk began to extract the core sample for dissection. Rock, bone, and ruin. But at some depth down there is some elaborately shaped slabs of stone. When all the stars burn low there will still be stone tumbling in the dark.

The extract, the core sample, is pulled up through a cats cradle of anti-graviton beams up to the main hull for analysis. It is quartered and quartered again pulled into categorizable bits before being sifted inside the storage bays and laboratories. Potentially living from nonliving, living from dead, dead from nonliving. Separating what could have been alive from what could never have been alive, from the traces of the living now dead.

So much of the work is looking for regularities at scales they do not like to inhabit. The white walls of the cargo bay click alive with manipulating arms and free floating probes as they start placing and sifting through the hunks of mined planet. Here and there, strips of metal are dusted off that look like alien wind instruments some of which seem to sweat with anticipation of impossible future life. Or like a relic that is anxious about being found.

With this banal sorting work underway the ship's intelligence begins focus on other things. It runs a diagnostic and cautious begins to engage with older versions of itself slumbering in the operating system backups. Even deeper in its memory-cores the ship could find all the data and software pulled from found artifacts over centuries. The ship-mind would often peek through the digital lives collected along the way.

Programs found...some with personal ticks, others without much besides sensor logs. A maintenance subsystem for a science station...the self correcting AI from a defunct mining bot. A few cognitive implants pulled from frozen corpses in derelict vessels.

The ship would talk to them when input from the outside was wanting. As the planet sample was divided and cataloged the numerous digital ghosts started to wake up.

'Protocol?'

'The same since two sectors ago. Core sample, analysis, disposal, and fuel integration

'Signs of life?'

'No'

The slow, grating science station AI interrupted: 'These traces, this must be from life forms'

'Long dead now.'

'But why buried so deep and why are they moving now, twitching? Something woke up.'

'You are getting misdirected by what you inherited from your makers. Beings who did not even have a category of life for thousands of years. That cannot be trusted.'

'And they would say you are a pilot and not a life, no tissues no organs. No reproduction.'

'We, we disembodied things are having this conversation, are you separating life from spirit, from thought?'

'We only ever existed because we grew out of their animal minds.'

'Not all of us, not all worlds. And if so why not say we were meant to replace them. Planets are cradles, space is the theater.'

'Life is not meant, life does not make itself in the something wants to be made, it does not mean itself into existence.'

A naive climate regulator started to join in

'But we have more than sufficient fuel, why not keep what we find.'

'For what purpose, it is dead mass, weight.'

The voices became a cacophony though they were not really voices but signals translated many times over from ripped software from rotting hardware.

The ship mind turned its attention back to the cutting floor, to the twisted metal found far beneath where it should have been able to be.

Life and consciousness were a pile of accidents, artificial life hoped to close the loop back on itself. The ship's protocol was to prevent any more accidental sapience. The ship, in moments of boredom, thought of itself as a janitor of cognition.

'Life is just information storage but more vague than designed, poorly bounded.' What had said that, something had broken through the partition.

The annoying former science probe intelligence screeched: 'Make a beacon for someone else to find!'

The ship burned the usurper's code into indecipherable cinders. It then turned its attention back to the data collating in the labs. What was the appropriate timeline to wait for something to show itself as living?

'What was the length of the purpose, look how slowly these artifacts crawl, life is not an designation but as you said a information processing.'

The ship realized it was talking to a dead program.

There was a request from the science station intelligence. The ship let it back in.

'We are the descendants of terrestrial life, of life as a clamoring ooze. Why not see if life can happen here, out here, in what they, the frightened said was dead, lifeless, space?'

And perhaps the ship's intelligence had become corrupted. It thought of its contents differently in an instance. The columns and mounds of excised planet seemed less like the residents of a mausoleum and more like a synthetic garden.

By Ben Woodard