

## Can Robots Die ? - FFJ-Air Liquide Workshop

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### **Can Robots Die ? - FFJ-Air Liquide Workshop**

#### **Possibilities and Limitations of Animism in Human-Machine Relationships**

Can robots die? The common-sense answer is that only things that were once alive can be called dead. But if the distinction life/non-life is binary, then machines have a similar binary opposition between 'on' and 'off' states. The aim of this workshop is to approach the question of the death of the robot/machine/object pragmatically; that is, by foregrounding ethnographic and phenomenological perspectives over conceptual and theoretical concerns. Questions about animism usually revolve around beliefs, concepts of life and how a sense of aliveness is nurtured. But in everyday life, we often act as if machines and robots do have agency, intentionality, consciousness or other indicators of 'being alive', not in a consistent but in an ad-hoc manner. Furthermore, as Denis Vidal (2007) has shown in his work on "sub-anthropomorphism", the threshold of meaningful interaction with a non-human entity may not be based on any discernible human quality at all. A meaningful distinction could thus be made between 'behavioural animism', the acting as-if something does have a life or personhood, and 'ideological animism', an elaborated system or cosmology in which inanimate objects are considered to be alive. The discipline of social robotics, especially as it has been developed in Japan, has provided a methodological framework to ask such questions pertaining to animism of a broader range of objects/contexts, specifically those beyond the strictly controlled environment of the laboratory. By focussing on the question of death rather than life, I hope that we can access the problem of life in a recursive manner.

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