

PURPLE DIARY

Pierre Huyghe

By Oliver Zahm and Ari Marcopoulos (2011)

Pierre Huyghe is one of the most important artists to emerge out of the French scene of the '90s. Back then his agenda was to introduce the vocabulary of cinema — casting, acting, production, editing — into an art context. Combining public performance and video projections, Huyghe presents a multifaceted visual experience that creates an existential tension between reality and fiction. I met him in New York to talk about his film, *The Host and the Cloud*, his 20 years of experimenting with different art forms, and his collaborations with other artists.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Here we are in New York City. What's your history with this city, Pierre?
pierre huyghe — I first came here in the early '80s, when I was 21, for an exhibition with the Ripoulin Brothers at Tony Shafrazi's gallery. Warhol was there. I was hanging around with Keith Haring. I met Jean Michel Basquiat. It was a pretty big deal, coming into the art world this way, through this door, but it wasn't mine yet.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You're one of the few French artists of your generation who have moved across the Atlantic. What's kept you in New York?

PIERRE HUYGHE — In the beginning it was because I was invited to do shows here. I stayed because I love this city and I found the situation in France limiting. I've always liked the idea of being able to lose myself, and I could no longer do that in Paris, physically, intellectually, or emotionally.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Was Paris too "mapped-out" for you?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes, I had a mental map, which is why I needed to become a foreigner, someone who was not from the place where I live. I enjoy that feeling. In New York everyone's a foreigner. It has an incredible diversity of cultures and people. There's a certain friction here, whereas in Paris it feels much more homogenous. I felt trapped there.

OLIVIER ZAHM — After living in New York, does Paris seem a bit depressing?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes. But not just the French art world — it's the entire country, a country whose talent for self-criticism is such that you can't propose anything without it being systematically torn down, made fun of, and ridiculed in some way. It's a culture of self-destructive cannibals. Every time you say something that's actually constructive, you can't stop yourself from also saying something that automatically denigrates or diminishes either yourself or the constructive thing you want to say. In that way, you don't appear to have been taken in by what you're saying, before someone else accuses you of that. It's a useless and tiresome intellectual game that generates a certain perversity in your relationships.

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OLIVIER ZAHM — In France, you have to ridicule everything so you don't appear to be...
PIERRE HUYGHE — ... fooled by the very system you ridicule.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It becomes a non-criticism, a renunciation of real criticism in a light, seemingly general critique of the system. Permanent French irony is how we force ourselves to accept things. It's the new consensus.

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes, submission disguised as criticism. But irony can quickly become negative. The cynicism, the perpetual mind games, and the false elegance remind us that we can't be duped because we might fall into the ridiculously serious.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The systematization of irony and cynicism produces suppression.

PIERRE HUYGHE — Which makes one descend into a kind of sterile, decorative, precious, even mega-depressed intellectualism, à la Houellebecq, one accompanied by an unconscious hypocrisy, which is difficult for an artist, because there's no validation.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Or position.

PIERRE HUYGHE — But I'm also in touch with a new generation of French artists who are no longer interested in this self-denigrating irony. When I lived in Paris I tried to stay away from that state of mind of unconscious hypocrisy. But, inevitably, you do get caught up in it. So I moved to New York to escape this sclerotic context, and be in a more open space, where dialogue continues with other artists. Yesterday I was with Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija and ten other very diverse artists, just talking about things.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In New York I feel — to borrow the name of the French Triennial — “the force of art.” In New York that force is driven by the market, especially by Larry Gagosian.

PIERRE HUYGHE — Art has a very different social function in New York than it does in France, which is more outside the market economy. It's not a cultural pretext set in the middle of the country somewhere. It has its own place in the social scheme of things.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What is the social placement of American art?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Maybe we should make an analogy to American film. Whenever there's a problem in American society, from random squibs on the police blotter to political catastrophes, Hollywood makes a movie about it in the ensuing months or years. I think that artists also work something like that in the USA. It works differently in Europe. French Nouvelle Vague cinema had this relationship to the present. When the Minister of Culture speaks about the tenement projects in Deux, trois choses que je sais d'elle, an honest statement about the Paris suburbs in the '60s, Godard is saying, “There's this.” It wasn't on the television news programs. America needs its cinema to express contemporary stories at the same time things are happening. Artists here have a similar role. But in Europe we've already lived through all this history, so we have more time, which is also good. We structure stories quite differently, just as Antonioni or Dominique Gonzalez Foerster structure their films differently.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In interpreting the contemporary?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes, and by doing so, Americans register and pronounce things about what is

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contemporary in American society, even when it's with somewhat abstract or simplistic means, or with only symptoms.

OLIVIER ZAHM — As a French artist, don't you feel you're in a position of weakness when dealing with the American art world?

PIERRE HUYGHE — No. Should I? In any case, American culture is indirectly ours. We were America's colonizers. We too have seen E.T. and listened to George Bush. [Laughs] It's no longer a story that belongs only to Americans. I don't think of myself as outside of the story, since it was told to me, too. It's even important for the Americans that there are fun-house mirrors for their culture — as it's a country of emigrants.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Conversely, do you feel that your work is understood? Aren't your procedures too complex or refined for the immediate impact that New York audiences expect from art and art exhibitions?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes, but I don't think about specific audiences. There's a kind of complexity that comes from Europe, from its history and its different ways of thinking. I don't mean to simplify or diminish anything — which may come off as opaque. I affirm that complexity. I prefer the risk. Otherwise, I would find myself following the art world's version of Nielsen ratings, worrying about what they want. I don't work in design or crafts or the applied arts. If my work appears difficult, it isn't a problem. Being dumbed-down by audiences is uninteresting and counter-productive.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What's your most successful piece?

PIERRE HUYGHE — The anime character of Annlee and No Ghost Just a Shell, created in collaboration with Philippe Parreno and other artists. But there's also The Third Memory, which involves the bank robber played by Al Pacino in the film Dog Day Afternoon. After he got out of prison I asked him to reconstruct the robbery. But he'd seen the film and reinvented his memories of the event. They ended up somewhere between his previous memories and a fictional version. So I took pieces from his life and the film.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I want to talk to you about your generation of French artists. It all began with the idea of collaboration, exchange, distancing oneself from the forcible affirmation of a signature, and the idea of having alternative activity in the art market, in the galleries. I felt that at the end of the '90s or in the early zeros, this model stopped working. Now it seems it may be starting up again — with a return to things that were pretty much left behind. Are these trends coming back, being re-established?

PIERRE HUYGHE — I think you have it exactly right. It's true that at the beginning we did a lot of collaborating. We needed to establish a critical space, which did not exist, using other modalities of showing art and of art production. There was a need to define art against a context that focused mostly on the object, its signature, and its role in the market. Working in association with another artist or with other artists, the dynamic of exchange — of ideas and materials — enters the process. I worked on the ideas of authorship, exhibitions, and forms or shapes from the beginning, in the Association des Temps Libérés, in 1995, in the house project called The House or Home?, in 1995, and then in No Ghost Just A Shell, with Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, and Dominique Gonzalez Foerster.

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OLIVIER ZAHM — What happened to the house project?

PIERRE HUYGHE — We still have the prototype, which is a very nice one. It's a house under construction, like the ones I photographed under construction in Southern Europe. It's like a building site of interpretations.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What happened to the house project?

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OLIVIER ZAHM — What were the conceptual foundations of your work, exchanges, and collaborations?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Polyphonic associations, the question of scenarios, the context and its temporality, and how to negotiate and renegotiate a common space — an exhibition conceived like a scenario. I think my generation remains attached to questions dealing with appearances, signs, and a reality that is psychological as well as social. What scenario separates reality from representation? What are the production conditions of any phenomenon? What are the processes and chain links of connection? What interested us is what happens between representation and presentation, which triggers the question of how an exhibition is imagined and conceived.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Along with the idea of working with fictions, you distance yourself from the object as a fetish, from the unique, signed object.

PIERRE HUYGHE — Questioning the object, placing oneself upstream from it, and allowing its resolution to be uncertain, is all still under discussion.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you mean that objects are subject to interpretation, and that somehow removing the art object from the fetish of acquisition is possible?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes, exactly.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is this a political attitude?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes, because if you want to change the paradigms of exhibition and rethink the conditions under which an object is created — who it speaks to, what the creator's role is, under what conditions, or in what events the object appears — these practices tend to change the relationship between the work and its audience, which is political.

OLIVIER ZAHM — For me, this became a movement. By the end of the '90s I was rather disappointed by the attitudes of certain individuals who returned to isolated practices, to making signified objects, which also seemed more limited.

PIERRE HUYGHE — You're probably right. We all went off in different directions. That doesn't mean we gave up on our ideas or our artistic exchanges. In order to retain our vitality we needed some kind of explosion, in order to create true polyphony, otherwise it ends up like people in a couple who live together for a long time and resemble each other, who say the same things, eat the same things. They're no longer two individuals, they're a unit. In all tribes, rituals

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and habits are formed and a common language is created. But it can seize up and become too precious. To retain singularity in the common...

OLIVIER ZAHM — You all went off in different directions...

PIERRE HUYGHE — The dialogue doesn't stop for those who want to continue constructing. Other people only pass through, but with Rirkrit Tiravanija, for example, the dialogue continues.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What about Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and Liam Gillick?

PIERRE HUYGHE — I think that if you force collaboration, it turns into the manipulation of a puppet.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I'd like your opinion of Relational Aesthetics, Nicolas Bourriaud's description of this entire generation. It has never seemed quite right to me, but somehow the label stuck. By the way, he was supposed to have conducted this interview, not me.

PIERRE HUYGHE — No, it may not be quite right, but should we worry about it? Art history has always employed bad terms — Pop Art, Conceptual Art, Minimal Art. They're all so reductive. Relational Aesthetics is a term that was applied to a generation and it crystallizes an artistic context. However, the word "relationship" has always interested me, the architecture of relationships, which creates a situation, a context...

OLIVIER ZAHM — I remember a casting session you did for an exhibition at the CAPC in Bordeaux.

PIERRE HUYGHE — It was called Scénario pour un sitcom (Storyline for a Sit-com). I'd given people portions of a film script, dealing with the question of the doubling of identities in Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde, Bergman's Persona, Godard's Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle, Kubrick's 2001, and others. They interpreted these bits of the script, in which the films were answering each other, actually dialoguing with each other. The session took place in the museum's theatre. I was interested in the moment that precedes the moment — when the roles are assigned, but before they become actual characters. It was improvised and performed by amateurs, or by people touring the exhibition at the same time. It took place on a stage and was at once a screen test and a film shoot. I've done quite a lot of casting sessions — for Pasolini's Uccelacci e Uccellini (Hawks and Sparrows), for example, in Italy. The exhibition lasts as long as the casting. I also did dance casting sessions in Lyon. There was an architecture of relationships inhabiting the exhibition and the museum, and it functioned like an ecosystem. I'm increasingly interested in questions of biology and the word "relation," as part of "relational aesthetics," which I understand to mean the connections made between all the elements constituting a situation, or an exhibition context, or the very center of a piece.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You were significantly influenced by Guy Debord's, Society of the Spectacle. I remember the posters you made for a supermarket parking lot showing men and women pushing shopping carts. You used the ad space to send back to the consumers the image of tautological circulation between spectacle and consumption. Where did you acquire your passion for Guy Debord and Situationism?

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PIERRE HUYGHE — I was a member of the Autonomes group in Paris, which is where I discovered Debord and anarchist literature.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Were you a member of the French Left?

PIERRE HUYGHE — No, the French Radical Left — and I was flirting with ideas involving direct or armed actions. There were former members of the Red Brigade who sought political asylum in France. We were in contact with members of the Action Directe group. But I saw the limitations of all of that. If you're that far left you assign yourself a certain role, which is exactly what I didn't want to do.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So you turned to art instead of political activism?

PIERRE HUYGHE — It was around the same time I was attending the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and hanging around with a group of artists called the Ripoulin Brothers, which included Claude Closky and Nina Childress, among others. We would paint on posters, which we would then furtively paste onto those big advertising billboards. Around that time I discovered a similar attitude among American artists like Alan Kaprow, Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, and Lawrence Weiner; among French artists like Buren; in underground cinema; and in Pasolini. I was finding things in all different domains — in the twisted comedy of Andy Kaufman, in the works of Marcel Duchamp, in Dada, and in The Sex Pistols.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Did you conceal your Leftist past?

PIERRE HUYGHE — I've never been a Leftist and I've never wanted that kind of role. For my latest project I used the trial of Action Directe, which took place behind closed doors. I went to see Helyette Bess, who's the living memory of Action Directe, and she helped me.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Tell me about your experience with the Ripoulin Brothers.

PIERRE HUYGHE — It was my first artistic adventure. We left the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs after two years — this was in 1984 — and decided to intervene directly in urban spaces. We pasted our own posters on billboards and advertisements. It wasn't graffiti. We used real painted posters.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It was an interesting time.

PIERRE HUYGHE — I don't talk about it much because I don't feel like I did very interesting things. But the time itself was certainly interesting. I retain the idea of collaboration from it. There were seven of us, and we were always working together in spaces that weren't really art spaces. There was the question of format and temporality and the idea of appearance as opposed to exhibition. We wanted to create situations that could appear and disappear overnight. The poster was pasted on and could be covered over instantaneously. We were inserting ourselves into a format, a circuit, an economy. We invited Keith Haring to Paris and he stayed for a while and worked with us on our posters.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What's your most recent project?

PIERRE HUYGHE — A live experiment that's become a two-hour film, *The Host and the Cloud*. I organized a series of events at the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires, which has been closed for three years, so it was quite empty. I placed 15 actors in specific conditions. In the

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beginning they took on the functions of the museum staff. Then I got them involved in different situations and performances that involved fragments of culture and recent history. I invited an audience of around 50 guests, or witnesses, to watch them. You could think of it as a laboratory, or a venue, in which actors experience what it's like to mount an exhibit. We did it on three different days, Halloween, Valentine's Day, and May Day (the French Labor Day). The entire building was filled and many events took place simultaneously. As a guest/witness you experienced the fragments randomly, according to how you moved around the museum, seeing actors in different situations, which could metabolize into a scene. You could see how influences propagate and transform, because even if the conditions were set, what ensued was not. The following day it all began again and was filmed.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you maintain a critical post-situationist position in relation to the "society of the spectacle" — by blurring the lines and positions between audience, stage, spectators, and actors, while mixing the genres of performance, theater, cartoon, film, and documentary?

PIERRE HUYGHE — I have nothing against a spectacle or performance being a format or means of expression, whether it's alienating or constructive. Although we must ask ourselves what we're criticizing in the spectacle itself.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What we criticize in a spectacle is the establishment of a world without quality.

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes, we are losing the essence of experience; we can agree on that. I think that we must metabolize the spectacle itself. It's not about accepting the world, nor judging it morally. We can also invent it. We can speak from inside the spectacle, or make its language stammer, as Deleuze said about literature. There are those who think that in trying to make the spectacular language stammer, we continue to feed the master's language, that of domination. It's not only about deconstructing or desecrating its rules, it's about inventing other rhythms, other tunes, and performing roles for each other instead of just playing them.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's what Debord called at the end of his life the reign of the "integrated spectacle." How do you reposition your artistic practice in the context of this refracted, generalized spectacle, in which each of us makes his or her life a daily performance, which is integrated into the great machinery of post-capitalistic performances?

PIERRE HUYGHE — What a terrible disappointment when you realize that your personal scenario is not really all that unusual. What is the portrait of this person, this protagonist who no longer belongs to history, but who is still a character in it? There is abstraction and complexity as well as incertitude. The fleeting presence of Pasolini's fireflies is a metaphor for hope. I believe in the construction of a singular world, something complex, and in its affirmation. I also believe that artistic experience escapes this kind of generalization, that it's about commitment, and what I have to give is the freedom I give myself, the imaginary potential.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Can that be a source of poetic communication — when things go off the rails or begin to drift?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes, because one's no longer following a program, or coding. Any supposed efficiency — one demanding that something precise happens at a specific place — is

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compromised. But if you alter the program, even just a little, everything changes. We need a musical cue in the middle of the fanfare, to show us where there's a possibility for friction, porosity, experience, and a little rambling.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do we qualify your method of counter-programming? As a narrative deconstruction, perhaps?

PIERRE HUYGHE — I play with fiction on one hand and reality on the other. I attempt to de-fictionalize fiction and, at the same time, to de-realize reality, such that the certainty of roles is questioned, which makes a moirage, a new pattern, one which brings out a different image. What I offer is this possibility, this potential, at the intersection between something real and its representation — even if this freer space is now turning into applied arts or something commercial.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You propose a critical distance.

PIERRE HUYGHE — I prefer to think of it as the freedom to invent a language. It's not an isolation of the self, inventing another specific, precise, coherent, and poetic language. I don't have to think about skill. Often the efficiency sought by a market or an ideology dismisses out of hand that which may be uncertain, fragile, or subjective. We need, instead, to support trouble and complexity, and that which seems to be minor or odd. Not for the pleasure of complexity itself, but to allow for other ways to show us how to get there. Which leads us to the question of love, which is a complex journey.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How did the psychological considerations of your work bring you to create aquariums?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Each aquarium reflects a state, an emotion, or a specific behavior. Each one is a situation that echoes one that any one of us might have encountered. This comes from the choice of the animals, which are often archetypes, which we may have met in stories and tales from different cultures. It's a natural ecosystem. It's a collection of animals, staged like any other aquarium. These are not actors. They're not acting or performing. They're unaware of this, but are still characters caught up in conditions beyond their control. Even if their situation is fictional, what happens is real, and it's constantly, slowly changing. There is always one fish that finds itself in each aquarium. It can be found in many different milieus.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You were just talking about love. Does love have anything to do with your current work?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Alain Badiou talked about *L'éloge de l'amour* in the latest issue of *Purple*. He spoke of the famous Scene of Two. You don't sign a contract when you fall in love. There are inevitably moments when things screw up, when things do not go according to plan. There are accidents, and that's why each time is a unique experience.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is love a form of counter-programming?

PIERRE HUYGHE — The journey of love is indeed a counter-program. I believe in the necessity of being in love with something or someone — “the missing half,” as Henry Miller called it. I believe we constitute ourselves with that other person. Obsessions allow us to invent something singular and personal. My latest work, *The Host and the Cloud*, is a journey of love and an erotic

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process, which is perhaps why there were so many women. It's my anima, and they are my female avatars.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is it more a film than a documentary?

PIERRE HUYGHE — It documents in part what happened at the museum. But it's more than a simple documentary. It's a movement of thought. The actors represent certain states of mind, and the situation creates movements. Then you add an animated fictional character, a rabbit, which moves around in the film.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Tell me more about the rabbit.

PIERRE HUYGHE — It's the mental alter-ego of a real person that we never actually see. The museum is the spirit of this person, who may be myself, or not. Children have imaginary playmates. It's the opposite here: an imaginary person is inhabited by a multitude of real persons — humanity, actors moving around the museum. In this person's path, in this migration, there are several moments, beginning with a separation. The reality of this experience — everything that happens in the museum — is real: nothing is mediated. When people make love in the basement, it's real. When someone takes a sleeping pill, it's real, too. It's really the French model Audrey Marnay who walks the runway. Someone has really been hypnotized. And even if the trial presented is restaged, inevitably the experience of the moment is really experienced by the actors undergoing it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And this very protean mental experience ...

PIERRE HUYGHE — ... is quite heterogeneous, like the collective unconscious.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is this synthesized in the experience of love?

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes. It's something we can't diminish. Religions, states, and conjugal ideology have all tried to contain this "life bomb," knowing that love can upset all reason. We know how much the mercantile world is affected by staged desire, but never by the violence of the love experience — otherwise things would really go off the rails.

OLIVIER ZAHM — For you the experience of love is the sole authentic or relentless experience that can escape spectacle — or escape the idea that everything is pre-programmed in a matrix. It's as if, at the time when each of us thinks about the character in his or her own story, the only scenario over which we have no control is that of love — the one that actually creates destiny.

PIERRE HUYGHE — Just like Bataille, Sade, and Fourier thought.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The love story escapes the ideas of narrative and scenario to which you seem to be so attached!

PIERRE HUYGHE — Yes, and because of that, the love experience is so rich in narrative. There are a million castrating, ball-busting, counter-narratives, so it will not become a force for freedom or mindlessness. Love is an extremely violent event, a real experience. We can't control the love scenario. That's what makes you step out of character — in your own story. That's what bothers us. We're characters, but we're not actors.

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OLIVIER ZAHM — Which is why the best stories are love stories, because love is something that can contradict history. The story cannot be completely false or manipulated. The love story is what makes it true, putting an end to the infinite possibility that the story may go on. It fascinates the world. It's the mirror of our paradoxical condition. In love we play a role. We think we're following the rules, but then we realize that we're characters in a story that's bigger than we are, one that wasn't staged. At the end of the story, when we live happily ever after and have many children, when love has finally been resolved non-problematically, the story ends. Only love can end the story.

PIERRE HUYGHE — And all fiction stops with this experience, like an accident in which you disappear off the face of the earth. In reality, you stop being a character, at least momentarily.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What can I do to stop being just a character?

PIERRE HUYGHE — I think you have to be in love, to metabolize the story, to play the roles for yourself. To be a person, you have to be willing to play with the characters.