

# Frieze

## *Bon Voyage*

*Pierre Huyghe*

By Tom Morton (April 4, 2003)



'Under the moon the back lot was thirty acres of fairyland - not because the locations really looked like African jungles and French châteaux and schooners at anchor and Broadway at night, but because they looked like the torn picture books of childhood, like fragments of stories dancing in an open fire. I never lived in a house with an attic, but a back lot must be something like that, and at night of course in an enchanted distorted way, it all comes true.'

*F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Last Tycoon (1941)*

It is winter in Paris, or so it seems. Beyond the Périphérique two tower blocks rise out of the parkland, all wet concrete walkways and thin, whippy trees. They are set at an angle to each other, about 45 degrees, two strangers in strange proximity, catching each other's eyes. Weather whirls around them, water molecules configuring and reconfiguring. Snow falls, settling on the grass. Despite the cold climate (with its rumours of rheumatism, runny noses, damp on the walls), the towers seem warm - not hot, exactly, but the temperature of a cheap computer. While it is nearing midnight, the sky is illuminated, as though the moon were a low, weak sun.

The tower blocks feature in Pierre Huyghe's film *Les Grands Ensembles* (The Big Complexes, 1994/2001). Importantly, they are models - mock-ups of postwar housing projects, weathering a simulated storm. Frosty with ice crystals, with cold fallen stars, they have a vaguely sci-fi feel. Let your mind wander and they become the monoliths from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), fast-tracking France's poor through the evolutionary process. Now and then the buildings blink. Maybe they're trying to communicate something - a greeting, perhaps, or a garbled SOS. I suspect this is accidental, though, and the people in the apartments are just watching TV, slaves to the listings, to the factory bell of the banlieues.

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The buildings begin to bustle with lights - a binary snowstorm that knows nothing of the weather's morphology, its freedom, its mad sprawling maths. Winter is replayed in the apartments' windows, its complexity cast aside like a wet coat. *Les Grands Ensembles* is about what we lose when we domesticate things but it's also, I think, about time. Huyghe presents us with three temporal models. The first, the weather system, represents time told by the seasons. The second, the windows, represents time told by TV. The third model is the towers themselves. As the film nears its end, their flickering lights synch with the soundtrack. The buildings beam, as though they remember a moment, long ago, when they were objects of beauty. They still are, seen from a distance, but this is the distance between a dream and its fulfilment, between a design for a better life and a better life itself.

Huyghe's work is like a studio back lot, a territory full of false memories and half-remembered films. His *L'Ellipse* (*The Ellipsis*, 1998), a triple projection, jimmies open a jump-cut in Wim Wenders' *The American Friend* (1978). In the 'found' footage a young man, played by Bruno Ganz, makes a phone call in a Paris apartment. Soon (at the speed, in fact, of a shutter) he's in another part of the city, another apartment, his ears burning with bad, bad news. Watching the movie, we know that the trip lasts a matter of minutes, that Ganz' character doesn't dawdle, or stop for a doughnut or stop to take in a show. Why do we know this? Because we've all been there or thereabouts, have all rushed across a city, bad news breathing down our necks. We fill the cracks in the film with our own experience, becoming Wenders' co-pilot. In *L'Ellipse* Huyghe plays on this process, inserting a scene in which Ganz - now enjoying jowly middle age - makes the journey that the jump-cut cuts out.

Ganz' expedition is almost comically mundane. Roller-bladers roll by, litter flurries about his feet, the Eiffel Tower hulks on the horizon. Nobody gives him a second glance, nobody seems to know that, 20 years ago, he played a moustachioed man in a Wim Wenders movie. Ganz walks on, not speaking, not performing at all, just plodding. For all its emptiness, though, *L'Ellipse* has an odd, lilting poetry. It makes me think of the temporal folds in every film I've ever seen, of the possibilities they present, of the swallowed worlds they contain that might, with a little imagination, be summoned into being. Huyghe's piece plugs one ellipsis, but it opens up others: between a player and his part, a role and its reprise. Watching Ganz walk through Paris (his meaty hands hanging out of his trench coat like lolling puppets or a pair of pink mittens), it feels as though he might, at any moment, fade into nothingness. Perhaps it's because fictional characters can't survive outside fictions for very long, or perhaps it's because he's a ghost, a non-person haunting a non-place.

Disembodiment plays a big part in Huyghe's work. His ghosts aren't ghosts per se (or at least only one of them is, and she's no poltergeist, no chain-rattling ghoulie). Rather, they are avatars, real and imagined; people who operate as emptied-out signs. Huyghe's film *Blanche Neige Lucie* (*Snow White Lucy*, 1997) focuses on Lucie Dolène, the woman who provided the voice for Disney's French version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). It opens with a shot of a blue screen, the type used in effects-heavy movies, a stage without a backdrop, awaiting a programmer's whim. Dolène appears, singing 'Someday My Prince Will Come', her face framed by her platinum hair. We discover that Disney reused her performance without her permission, and that she sued the company, and won the case. 'When I gave my voice to that character,' she

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says, 'that beautiful little princess, graceful and innocent, I was Snow White ... Yes, absolutely ... Today when I watch the film I have a strange feeling, it's my voice and yet it doesn't seem to belong to me anymore, it belongs to the character and to the story.' Perhaps, but in Blanche Neige Lucie she challenges Snow White with Snow White's voice, reinhabits her own creation, haunts herself.

John Wojtowicz, in a way, is the polar opposite of Dolène - a man trying to recast the character he's become. In 1972 he robbed a bank in Brooklyn. An alarm was tripped and the bank became surrounded by cops, news crews and baying New Yorkers. Holed up with his hostages, he became hot media property, knocking Richard Nixon's presidential renomination off the front pages. The episode concluded with Wojtowicz' arrest and the murder, by the FBI, of his accomplice Sal. Three years later Sidney Lumet fictionalized the robbery in his film *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). Wojtowicz was played by Al Pacino, and snippets of Pacino's performance (a shotgun in his hand, his black hair lapping his brow) appear in Huyghe's *The Third Memory* (2000). The rest of the film features Wojtowicz, now a fat man in his 50s, prowling a mock-up of *Dog Day's* set. He's here, he claims, to set the record straight, but I'm not sure I believe him. Reliving the 'real' robbery, his language - 'Anyone touch the alarms and I'll blow you brains out' - has the timbre of 'You talkin' to me?' It's the stuff of method acting, not recollection; the history of film, not history itself. This, though, is what makes Huyghe's work sing. He gives Wojtowicz the opportunity to reappropriate his past, and in a sense he does, transforming it into a fresh fiction, a third - perfect - memory.

What if there were no self to mediate, or if the self were made up of nothing more than its own mediation? In 1999 Huyghe and Philippe Parreno purchased the copyright to Annlee, a production-line manga character with saucer-shaped eyes and choppy purple hair. Soon they began to loan her image out to other artists, inviting them to vivify her half-life, to help establish who she might be. (Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Melik Ohanian were among those involved). Her last appearance as an empty sign was at the group show 'No Ghost Just a Shell' (2002) staged at the Kunsthalle, Zurich, and the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. There she was 'liberated' by Huyghe and Parreno, by means of a legal agreement that gave her ownership of her own image. Annlee is a well-known project, but its concerns pulse through Huyghe's work like an underground stream, emerging now and then in unexpected locations. Its most obvious precursor is Huyghe and Parreno's publication *Anna Sanders* (1997). Beneath the masthead there's a message to the reader: 'Anna Sanders is not the person you can catch a glimpse of on the cover. You will not see any pictures of her, but nevertheless she is always present - in the choice of articles and pictures and in the graphic design.' In a sense she's a twist on Cosmo woman and GQ man, on demographic phantoms, on 'personalities' composed of magazine pages. *Anna Sanders* is a patchwork, featuring wobbly photos, a satire on *Star Wars* (1977) and the score of a tune to hum at the wheel. It's hard to get a grip on the girl it points to, although I have a vague feeling she'd be a good travelling companion and that she'd tell you a lot about her childhood. She seems, if anything, more like a place than a person, somewhere to move through, to daydream in, to wander around at will. *Anna* also appears in Huyghe and Parreno's *L'Histoire d'un sentiment* (*The Story of a Feeling*, 1996), a sort of deliberately unfiled film script. The text concludes with a 'what if' scenario, in which a group of people gather in a room to build a holographic image together, using only their minds. At first the image is a mess

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of misrememberings, then it becomes monstrous, and then it becomes, if not totally true, then a world away from the kind of small, private truths that kill thinking dead. 'The cinemas have been transformed', write Huyghe and Parreno. 'The audience no longer faces the screen. The seats are arranged in a circle, looking at the centre.' It is, in a way, a critique of what Guy Debord termed 'the spectacle', but it's more than that. It's a tool with which to think about Huyghe's work, with its remade memories, its temporal secret pockets, its gaggle of ghosts. Most importantly, though, it suggests a new way of looking, and that's what all art, at its best, should do. Perhaps Anna's third manifestation should come as no surprise: the production company Huyghe and Parreno established with the director Charles de Meaux is named, of course, after her - Anna Sanders Films.

I missed the boat at Huyghe's *L'Expédition scintillante: A Musical* (The Scintillating Expedition, 2002). When I saw the show at the Bregenz Kunsthau, Austria, there was long damp patch on the first floor where a ship, sculpted out of ice, had recently stood. Apertures opened in the ceiling, heavy with weather. Rain splattered, fog fumed and the falling snow formed itself into two conical hillocks, as though the ice-ship had dropped anchor in some marvellous mountain-fringed port where, its journey done, it had melted into its destination. A sound system played recordings of Radio Caroline and Radio Véronique, the offshore 1960s pop stations, creating a second, sonic topography, its radiation penetrating the exhibition's boundaries. Nearby a tiny wallchart detailed the weather conditions encountered in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), a nautical tale so fraught with ellipses that its narrator, despite his death at sea, approaches the worried Poe on the opening page. (Both Charles Baudelaire and Jules Verne engaged with Pym, Baudelaire by writing a translation and Verne by writing a sequel - an example, perhaps, of what Huyghe calls 'circular viewing'). On the floor above, a white box emitted smoke and coloured lights while Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies* (1888), arranged by Claude Debussy, seeped from the speakers. Half *Close Encounters of The Third Kind* (1977), half Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (1966), it was about making private psychedelic experience public, the visionary visible. The third floor, though, was where the show was really at. On the wall there was an exhibition poster spotted with penguins (a wonderfully absurd symbol of otherness) and scarred, like an ice rink, with lopsided figure eights. These shapes were re-incised on a real rink, as glossy as a new tombstone, by a weirdly gorgeous skater. Dancing across the dyed-black ice, kicking up sooty crystals, she spoke of the reinscriptions of Poe, Verne and Baudelaire but also the remaking, in the mind of the viewer, of *L'Expédition scintillante*. On the rink's lacquered lip there was a tiny hardback detailing Huyghe's 'initial thoughts for a musical and a collective expedition' - a proxy catalogue. But if this room was a meta-gallery, it was also, like the rest of the show, a landscape. Huyghe has defined the art exhibition as 'something you cross, where you suspend your conclusions'. Thinking about Huyghe's work - with its lack of borders, its sudden, overwhelming beauty - I can imagine no better advice.

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