



ON SITE

## POSSIBILITY OF AN ISLAND

### Ina Blom on Pierre Huyghe's *Variants*

IT IS NOT AN ESSENTIAL ISLAND, only an accidental one. When Pierre Huyghe found yet another occasion to intervene in a natural ecology, he conjured up an artwork that would not only be placed on an island; it would also in some senses be an island. Located at Kistefos Museum sculpture park, an hour's drive from Oslo, Huyghe's island differs from our habitual image of an autonomous landmass completely surrounded by water. It is a chaotic piece of wood and that juts out into a slow bend in the river and separates from the mainland only when the water is high; when the water is low, the land bridge to the surrounding forest is restored. As Gilles Deleuze pointed out, such temporary islands are born of disarticulation, erosion, and fracture. They remind us that the seas on top of the earth and that it takes advantage of the slightest depression in the terrain. We cannot take our ground for granted. Meanwhile, islands in the middle of the sea, essential islands, have the opposite effect: As the earth's surface rises above sea level, its permanence asserts itself. This is perhaps the reason for the persistent cultural dream about such islands and popular question about what single significant thing—book, record, piece of memorabilia—each of us would bring to ground our selves there. Who ever dreams about accidental islands? And what does it mean to turn one into a work of art?

At Kistefos, a river and waterfall cut a deep, forested wedge into the surrounding farmland. Outside a former wood-pulp factory, works by a long list of prominent contemporary artists adjust as best they can to a landscape that is hardly parklike in the traditional sense. "Untouched" might be a first and false impression of a terrain that has in fact been shaped by industry; "unmanicured" is more to the point. Yet none of the works engage the realities of the natural environment in ways that even come close to the disquieting intimacy achieved in Huyghe's *Variants*. At first, the topography seems



Pierre Huyghe, *Variants*, 2021—still from the real-time simulation component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising a scanned forest, generative mutations and sounds, intelligent camera, environmental sensors, animals, plants, microorganisms, and materialized mutations: synthetic and biological materials aggregate.

unremarkable. A walkway made from a metal grid leads across the flood-prone region and ends as a path appears. There are wooded areas interspersed with fallen trees, rocky grounds alternating with watery patches, a range of unspectacular plants, some debris, birdsong: the usual. To really see a forest is always a challenge, and it takes a while before more unusual elements begin to emerge: pink resin balls attached to tree trunks here and there. A continuous low-pitched buzz emanating from a small quarry topped by two cutoff utility poles. A formless metal element sticking up from an anthill. A couple of rusty metal barrels. A natural wax-yellow beehive merged with artificial beehive shapes in hot pink. Near the water, a fake-looking stone; an old sun-bleached boat pillow and strange yellowish spongelike forms. And then, more dramatically, an almost fully decomposed reindeer carcass, its bones intermingled with mutated osteal sculptural forms; the species is foreign to these woodlands. And finally, at the dry high point of the island, a large rectangular LED screen that almost fills a small clearing; in front of it, a scattering of small stones suggests seating for hares or porcupines. On the screen, a digital version of the forest surges forth with the restless intensity of someone intent on seeing it again and again, from all possible angles.

To watch the screen is not so much to see the landscape itself as to see a process of seeing and imagination—or mental mapping—unfold in real time. Mental mapping is a form of simulation, the process of coding, storing, and recalling a spatial environment—and what is shown on-screen is the point of view of an intelligent camera as it moves within an evolving digital simulation based on an initial 3D scan of the entire island. The camera eye makes its own decisions about where to go, what to look at, and at what speed: What we (or the porcupines) see on-screen is simply its continuously shifting apperceptions. Such is the nature of mental mapping: It is partial, slippery, dreamlike. And the mapping is additionally complicated by the fact that the landscape itself keeps changing. Physical sensors installed around the island provide feeds of biochemical and climatic data that are subsequently handed to artificial-intelligence software that uses generative modeling to create mutations in the simulation. There is, in other words, active growth within the model, just as there is growth in the island forest—growth that accelerates or decelerates based on the data feeds from the forest. When the simulation imagines the dead reindeer, the creature has far more fur than does the carcass in the landscape I visited. It also conjures up a human body lying on the ground with one foot caught in some strange contraption. As far as I could see, there was no such body on the island—but there might of course have been one in the past.

The simulation, and the apperceptions it creates, takes place in a technical realm that is closely entwined with nature. The LED screen may look intensely alien in this

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NOVEMBER 2022 63





Pierre Huyghe, *Variants*, 2021—, real-time simulation, scanned forest, generative mutations and sounds, intelligent camera, environmental sensors, animals, plants, microorganisms, and materialized mutations: synthetic and biological material aggregate. Installation views, Kitescof Museum sculpture park, Jenaaker, Norway, 2022. Photos: Ola Rindal.



context, an in-your-face disturbance of a sylvan scene—but it is in fact just the hard outer shell of a new living element within the island's ecology. To the organic processes of biological entities has been added the inorganic processing of information technologies—technologies that materially are closely related to minerals and metals that are already part of the island environment. At times, the volumetric mutations in the simulation also form the basis for the production of sculptural objects that are integrated in the actual forest landscape and altered in turn by its biochemical and climatic ecosystem.

This is not the type of ecology usually associated with the discipline of biology—but given the eroding distinction between biological and technical forms of life and liveliness, perhaps it should be. Terrain and simulation, natural and technical forms of perception and sensation, slow and speedy mutations and growth patterns appear so entangled that you begin having second thoughts about the origins of most of the things you see. Near the path, I stumbled across the almost completely eviscerated remains of a fox: 'What about that dark, plastic-looking membrane where the belly used to be? All natural, it turns out. But those intermittent choppy sounds that can be heard in the area near the screen do not, as I first thought, come from some strange bird. Or they may—but only after its song has been picked up by microphones and returned to the forest in real time as AI-generated mutations sounding from speakers hidden in the trees. The three identical anthills placed in a row

like Smiths onesque Earthworks in a white cube are, unsurprisingly, duplicates generated by simulation and added to the site. But to suspect that, you have to have been formed by the environment of contemporary art; they look natural enough.

What is certain is that no single significant thing can sum up the desire to be at one with this island or to be this island. If this landscape produces dreams—and as an artwork, it is of course also a dream of sorts—those dreams emerge from a fractured, multiplying reality. To dream, in this context, is first of all to experience the unraveling of the idea of pure nature, along with the closely related fantasies of conservation or conquest. Huge areas of supposedly untouched Amazon rain forest archive millennia of human intervention; our inability to see these interventions in the way we see cities and monuments is also what enabled particularly violent colonization and exploitation. To perceive forests in all their fullness, one must adopt a perspective that is ontologically multiple, a concatenation of interlocking relations, perspectives, and temporalities. In other words, one must see as Huyghe's camera does in the evolving forest simulation.

But Huyghe's island dream also distills developments that haunt more urban imaginations: the omnipresence of sensor-based technologies that program and reprogram our environment and the increasing importance of technical forms of intelligence—both instances of mental and material terrains that when multiplied and scaled up introduce, with unprecedented speed, transformations

in the realms of human sensation and thought. We already know that no image, no network diagram, no sociological report can adequately convey these developments—and so we keep looking around for symptoms of change or responses that might give some inkling of where we are headed.

Huyghe's long series of works probing the intersections of animal, human, and technical forms of life might be one such response. But, ultimately, such pieces also convey a specific perspective on what artworks are or should be: emergent terrains, new worlds in the making, instances of a drive to break off from that which already exists. When Deleuze wrote about islands, he was not, in the end, concerned with natural history. Islands were allegories for a general capacity for creation and invention, and the dreams that draw us to islands an example of that mobilization of thought and desire through which genuinely new things come into the world—like landmasses rising above the sea.

The actual geographic terrain on which *Variants* was developed may be an accidental island—but this does not prevent *Variants*, as a new environment and work of art, from being an essential, independent entity, an event in natural history as well as in the history of aesthetic expression. And this is even more the case as it produces less than idyllic ideas of what it means to be a place apart. □

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