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Pierre Huyghe

An artist in pursuit of unpredictable outcomes.

by Margaret Sundell (June 20, 2025)



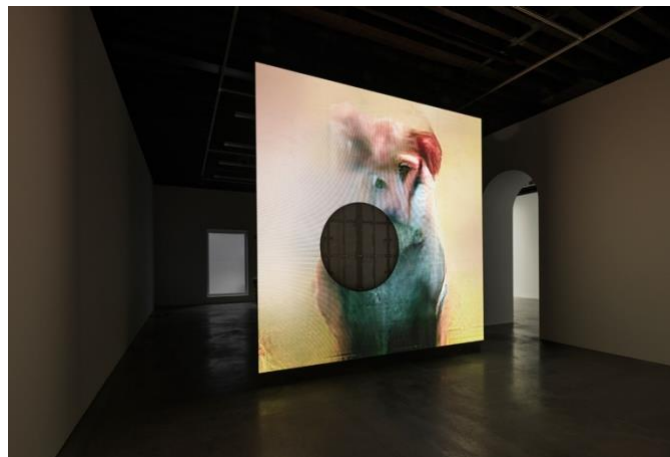
Pierre Huyghe: In Imaginal, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.
Photo: Alex Yudzon. Pictured: *Annlee – UUmwelt*, 2018–2024.

Pierre Huyghe: In Imaginal
Marian Goodman Gallery, 385 Broadway, New York City
Through June 21, 2025

Enter Marian Goodman’s hushed, darkened space and turn left into its north gallery. A subtle noise permeates the room—static, maybe, or the chirping of birds. It turns out to be the sound of brain waves. A large full-color LED screen emits one image after another, rapid-fire—so quickly that they’re hard to grasp. They seem to melt together, but each image also seems to be melting into itself. Set in the center of the screen against a stark background, they are Francis Bacon-esque figures that morph and meld, while retaining the same basic vertical form. For a moment, something like an eagle appears, then a half-dog half-horse, then a mangled face with slits for eyes. The result is powerfully evocative, conjuring the sense of an identity that is perpetually different.

You are witnessing *Annlee – UUmwelt* (2018–24)—the standout work in the gallery’s presentation of recent art by Pierre Huyghe. (Like most of the objects assembled, including an ambitious film installation and a number of smaller pieces, it was recently shown at *Liminal*, his tour-de-force exhibition held last summer in Venice’s Punta della Dogana.) This is an afterlife for Annlee, who originally served as the focal point of *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999–2002), a multiyear venture Huyghe developed with fellow French artist Philippe Parreno. The duo purchased the digital file and copyright of the doe-eyed manga character and then invited others from their circle (Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and others) to help them activate this “shell,” endowing her with multiple destinies and desires. The project became an emblem for critic Nicolas Bourriaud’s 1990s notion of “relational aesthetics”—a mode of making that emphasizes sociability over the creation of stable objects. Annlee was not an end in herself but a vehicle for meaning to be shared among friends.

Starting with his 1995 experiments with Parreno, Huyghe has pursued collaborations that loosen the artist's claim to authorship and lead to unpredictable outcomes. At the same time, he has explored the exhibition format as an ensemble of interacting elements. Over the years, these core concerns have evolved and become more complex as Huyghe has extended his partnerships to include nonhuman organisms. For instance, *Untilled* (2011–12), his contribution to Documenta 13, set in Kassel's Karlssau Park, featured a statue of a reclining nude with an active beehive for a head and a living dog with a leg painted pink. For *After ALife Ahead*, created for the 2017 Skulptur Projekte Münster, Huyghe turned an abandoned ice-skating rink into an elaborate ecosystem inhabited by bees, peacocks, and a venomous sea snail in an aquarium whose glass switched from transparent to black and back again, following a score developed from the patterns on the snail's shell. An incubator held cancer cells whose divisions triggered various actions in the environment.



Pierre Huyghe: *In Imaginal*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.
Photo: Alex Yudzon. Pictured: *Annlee – UUmwelt*, 2018–2024.

Looping back to Huyghe's early engagement with image-based work, *UUmwelt*—an ongoing project first displayed in 2018 at the Serpentine Gallery—is also a logical next step for the artist as he furthers possibilities for collaboration with the help of computational neuroscientists from Kyoto's Kamitani Lab, who use AI neural networks to devise digital renditions of images generated by human brain waves. *Annlee – UUmwelt*, an AI translation of the fMRI readings of two people picturing the manga character, is the latest in the series—its name a play on *Umwelt*, the term coined by early twentieth-century biologist Jakob von Uexküll to denote the subjective perception of the world as experienced by individual species (whereas a dog navigates its surroundings through smell, people rely on sight, and so forth). Just as each organism differs, no two "worlds" are the same. But Huyghe's extra U troubles von Uexküll's thesis. It nods, according to former Serpentine curator Rebecca Lewin, to the possibility of an *un-Umwelt*, where experience might be shared between species, and even humans and machines. This is what Huyghe's work stages, harnessing the limitations of the Kamatani Lab's technology (which still struggles to render complex mental images) to aesthetic effect. Collaging elements from an enormous database, the neural networks approximate the apple of the mind's eye through thousands of highly digitized attempts that possess their own strange beauty.



Pierre Huyghe: *In Imaginal*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.
Photo: Alex Yudzon. Pictured, center, in corner: *Idiom*, 2024.

The number of pictures in *Annlee – UUmwelt* is ultimately finite; their sequencing, though, and pauses in their flow, constantly change thanks to a computer-generated real-time editing process using AI software that reacts to a camera sensor attuned to the activities of gallery-goers and to the unearthly voice that periodically emanates from an artwork in a neighboring gallery: *Idiom* (2024), a golden LED screen mask. Here, Huyghe extends the dyadic interaction between humans and AI that generates visual effects into a network of call-and-response that resonates throughout the exhibition. But while technically a multi-actor aggregate, his work also implicitly suggests an *AI Umwelt*—a perception that is proper to artificial intelligence alone.



Pierre Huyghe: *In Imaginal*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.
Photo: Alex Yudzon. Pictured: *Camata*, 2024.

Huyghe gestures to a similar discernment, with less success, in the film installation *Camata* (2024), a bleak spectacle playing on the gallery's second floor. Shot in Chile's Atacama—among the most desiccated places on earth—it shows a human skeleton lying on the desert floor, believed to be the remains of a nineteenth-century soldier, flanked by two robotic arms with claws, along with two cameras (two more are reflected in the moving mirror of a nearby AI-powered heliostat). The claws solemnly place and replace small objects next to the skeleton—mineral fragments, glass beads, metallic cones; the cameras, driven by AI (with a human assist), captured the scene over the course of six days and six nights. Echoing the structure of *Annlee – UUmwelt*, this footage continuously self-edits in the gallery, here in response to the presence of viewers along with weather data from Chile. Described in Liminal's catalog as an “endless funerary rite,” the robots' activities feel slightly portentous. The ominous soundtrack doesn't help matters; nor does the vast, lifeless landscape. Although notable for the near-complete exclusion of humans in its fabrication, *Camata* reads less as a dialogue between creation and content than as simply an allegory—one we know too well—of a dystopian post-apocalyptic future ruled by machines.



Pierre Huyghe: *In Imaginal*, installation view. Courtesy the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery.
Photo: Alex Yudzon. Pictured: *Camata*, 2024.

But perhaps Huyghe's vision in *Camata* is more than a trope. While working on this text, I listened to *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat interview Daniel Kokotajlo, executive director of the AI Futures project and a former researcher at OpenAI. In his estimation, a fully independent artificial super intelligence will emerge as soon as 2027 and will eventually dispense with humanity as superfluous. But it might spare Pierre Huyghe—or at least his art. Indeed, one imagines this vastly more powerful AI contemplating the work on view at Marian Goodman and admiring its primitive efforts.