

ARTFORUM

What Does AI Dream Of?

Pierre Huyghe's Fondation Beyeler show imagines art after humanity

By André Rottmann (September 1, 2026)



Pierre Huyghe, *Idiom*, 2024–, real time voice generated by neural network, golden LED screen mask. Installation view. Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2026.
Photo: Ola Rindal. All Pierre Huyghe works © Pierre Huyghe, represented by ProLitteris (CH)/ADAGP (FR).

Curated by Mouna Mekouar and Anne Stenne

FOR OVER A DECADE, Pierre Huyghe has pioneered an ecological redefinition of contemporary art that disperses the artwork's discrete objecthood across hybrid networks of living, organic, and inert elements. His exhibition at the Fondation Beyeler sets the bucolic scenery and panoramic vistas of the Renzo Piano–designed institution against a bleak, ruinous, and quasi-dystopian environment subject to cyclical transformations. In this complex, crepuscular setting, Huyghe stained several glass panels of the galleries' ceilings, once described by Piano as a “machine for zenithal light,” with an almost repulsive yellow; intermittently, these panels open and move slowly along motorized steel tracks. Elsewhere, an animatronic sculpture convulses on the floor. Ants crawl through gallery walls while crabs and anemones sway in an aquarium. A panoply of sounds emitted by three video works intersects with sensors, algorithms, and kinetic mechanisms, making computational processes palpable within an unstable ecology of media, actors, actants, and images.

With this exhibition, Huyghe foregrounds a previously dormant dimension of his ecologized practice. His last comprehensive exhibition, “Liminal” at the Punta della Dogana in Venice in 2024, was dedicated to the evocation of indeterminate, uncertain, and unruly states of being at the intersections of the human

and nonhuman. The Beyeler show, however, reveals how Huyghe's art constructs mysterious yet poignant allegories involving the subjection of the human psyche, including its unconscious dimensions, to the laws and potentialities of generative data processing. Huyghe underscores the mutability and obstinacy of alternative intelligences to chart the unpredictable pathways of our digital unconscious.



Pierre Huyghe, *Apnea*, 2026, aquarium, soft robotics, silicone, mineral cast landscape, floating rock, sound, control unit, ventilation system, holes in walls, switchable glass. Installation view.

Many of the exhibition's new and older works imagine settings after human presence has been eclipsed—only for its remnants to be examined, occupied, and appropriated by other kinds of agents and forces, be they biological or (in broad terms) machinic. At the entrance of the exhibition, the living ants of *Umwelt*, 2011, exit and enter through a hole in the wall, collectively colonizing a site conventionally reserved for the display of aesthetic objects. The aquarium sculpture *Cambrian Explosion 19*, 2013, places prehistoric creatures in a volcanic rock landscape. In the now-classic video *Human Mask*, 2014, a monkey wears a Japanese Noh theater mask and long wig, exploring an abandoned streetscape near Fukushima after the 2011 nuclear disaster. More recently, in the film *Camata*, 2024, shot by autonomous cameras and edited in real time by AI, enigmatic robotic arms approach a human skeleton found lying unburied in the Chilean desert. Huyghe's show elicits a *futur antérieur*: a paradoxical chronotope in the wake of the demise of any anthropogenic impact, further augmented by his contamination of the existing architecture through signs of decay.

Throughout, Huyghe mines and synthesizes seemingly incompatible registers from art history—notably, the legacies of site specificity and Surrealism. In the exhibition's second room, the site-specific wall piece *Timekeeper*, 2026, reveals, like an archaeological excavation of long-ceased human activities, layers of paint from the institution's previous exhibitions in proliferations that evoke mold. He has also installed wall-to-wall carpets printed with a pattern that resembles dust particles (*Light Dust*, 2026), invoking Man Ray's *Élevage de poussière* (Dust Breeding): a 1920 photograph recording the dust that had accrued on Marcel Duchamp's then-stored-away *Large Glass*, 1915–23.

In at least two ways, Huyghe references the work of Michael Asher: *Timekeeper* recalls, for instance, the sandblasted walls of Asher's show at Galleria Toselli in Milan in 1973. The intervention on the Beyeler's glass ceiling called *L'hésitant*, 2026, is also reminiscent of Asher's successive removal and reinstallation of translucent ceiling diffusers at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven in 1977. In Huyghe's practice, these and other allusions do not serve to ingratiate his own practice within a well-established canon of modern and contemporary art. Instead, they are conceived as an archive—or, in the spirit of his installation at Documenta 13, *Untilled*, 2012, a compost—to be revisited, probed, reactivated, and subjected to chance. Huyghe's examinations of the epistemology of art may be described as operating at the dusk of the "night of substance" imagined by Friedrich Kittler in 1989: For the German media theorist, this darkening, mainly induced by digital technologies, began precisely when "what can no longer be imagined happens, because where nothing can be imagined, data processing takes place."¹



Pierre Huyghe, *Adversary*, 2026, aluminum cast, 11' 5 3/4" x 11' 5 3/4" x 2 3/4". Photo: Ola Rindal.

The show's largest room is bisected by Huyghe's *Adversary*, 2026, a monumental cast-aluminum bas-relief resembling a freestanding closed portal with two wings that features abstract, loosely biomorphic and geological formations on its uneven surface. *Adversary* epitomizes the artist's ruminations on the advent of the digital unconscious and its myriad consequences for the ecologies of art in the twenty-first century. But in its format and two-part structure, it signals, if only obliquely, Duchamp's *Large Glass* once more. Whereas Duchamp imagined an apparatus of desire in the age of mechanization, the puzzling forms on the surface of Huyghe's gate turn out to be derived from the exquisite corpse digitally generated by his ongoing project *Umwelt* (currently on view in the Sculpture Garden at the Museum of Modern Art in New York). For this project, he has collaborated, since 2017, with neuroscientists at Kyoto University who claim to visualize mental images (of humans, animals, and machines) through an fMRI scanner that records brain activity and an artificial neural network tapping into a picture database. Huyghe uses the resulting images to create palimpsests of the mind's many flickering figments. They are representations gone awry, with exaggerated shapes and distorted masklike features. Surrealist *écriture automatique* sought to liberate rational Western subjectivity through puns, slips, impulses, and other unconscious drives, thereby accessing a projected Other or primordial past. Similarly, *Adversary* (as well as the *Umwelt* project at large) confronts what the theorist of science, literature, and technology N. Katherine Hayles has called the "trauma of code." If the human unconscious (following Lacan) is

structured like a language, then, as Hayles concludes, “in our computationally intensive culture, code is the unconscious of language.”² But while the unconscious in the 1920s was thought to be graspable and representable by symptoms, dreams, and jokes, code is, as Hayles writes, the “shadowy double of the human-only language inflected and infected by its hidden presence.”

In the same gallery as *Adversary*, Huyghe’s ongoing *Idiom*, 2024–, takes the form of golden LED face masks worn by human carriers seated on the floor. Computer vision sensors embedded in each mask continuously capture motion data from visitors, processing this involuntarily supplied information into phonemes and syntax. The data is intermittently vocalized, at varying speeds, through mechanical speech organs installed within the mask. Near *Idiom*, *L’adestinée*, 2013–26, rests on the floor. It is a small handcrafted wooden cube with nails inserted as pips: a cherished family object in Huyghe’s own possession. Its irregular proportions render it dysfunctional as a die—incapable, as it were, of really producing the proverbial *coup de dés*. This archaic, modest item encapsulates the idea of a potential failure of chance amid “our computationally intensive culture” that purports to calculate even the unpredictable.

Liminals, 2025, is a film central to Huyghe’s current poetics and politics concerning the machinations of the digital unconscious. This mostly AI-generated work, co-commissioned by LAS Art Foundation and Hartwig Foundation and first shown in the Halle am Berghain in Berlin, follows the vicissitudes of a nude human figure who, instead of a face, has a gaping opening in the head—a negative or inverted mask—as it wanders in complete isolation across a deserted, rocky planet surrounded by oscillating particles and mineral matter. Over the film’s fifty minutes, the figure stands at the edge of an unfathomable depth, touches stone formations, crawls through dust, and probes the sandy surface of an ultimately uninhabitable environment with its fingers. In a particularly poignant scene, one of its fingers bends in an anatomically impossible angle. Time and again, the acephalous gestalt merges with its inorganic environment, only to reemerge and enter another cycle of its unstable—or “liminal”—existence. All of this plays over an impressive, visceral soundtrack said to convey the reverberations of actual atoms in molecular space (it was created in cooperation with physicists on a hundred-qubit quantum computer developed by Pasqal).

When it was first presented in Berlin this past winter, the work was criticized for what was seen as its fraught gender perspective (the figure has female anatomy and a cesarean-section scar). Some sequences of the simulation are troublesome—for instance, when the figure lets an elongated stone ledge penetrate the hole in its head. However, the larger context of the Fondation Beyeler show allows us to better place the work within Huyghe’s oeuvre; here, it’s apparent that *Liminals* is less about bodily specificity than about creating an allegorical fiction for the digital age that remains resolutely abstract and speculative, even if the tension between the universality of allegory and the veristic rendering of the figure remains irresolvable.

The work returns to Surrealism’s mythical quest for both the marvelous and the uncanny with recourse to the various automatisms of the unconscious—only to complicate its legacies today by eliciting the haunting, even traumatic, AI-induced counterimage of a human mind whose imaginative capacities will not only be infected and inflected by code, but figuratively and literally voided and annihilated by it.³ In the show, Huyghe placed Max Ernst’s painting *The Witch*, 1941, on loan from the Princeton University

Art Museum, echoing what Huyghe describes in the catalogue as the film’s “human-like figure”: a hybrid chimera that ought to be regarded as a revenant of Surrealism and its often gendered allegorical fictions (another point of reference is Claude Cahun’s photograph *I Extend My Arms* from ca. 1931–32, which shows two bare arms reaching out from a monolith to fuse a human form with inanimate stone).

Huyghe’s project, with its constantly reemerging and modulating protagonist, all of its dystopian and violent bleakness notwithstanding, would seem to insist that subjectivity, in the words of French philosopher Félix Guattari (whose theorization of *Chaosmosis* is highly informative for Huyghe), remains a “machinic assemblage,” composed of technological, bodily, ecological, and semiotic components, and which finds itself continuously made and remade.⁴ As the artist muses in his notes in the catalogue, the work paradoxically aims to “*donner naissance à un nous . . . en dehors de nous*” (give rise to a we . . . outside ourselves).⁵

In Huyghe’s optics, the human unconscious may persist even if, to quote Hayles, the “shadowy double of the human-only language” professes to colonize and ultimately supplant it with its own code. Programmatic in this regard is the new work *Apnea*, 2026, the show’s infrastructural and conceptual center. A curling, slightly abject white silicone lump audibly inhales and exhales in an aquarium. Its respiratory sounds are dispersed, via a ventilation system, through the exhibition, emanating through actual currents of air from multiple rough holes in the walls. As indicated by the title, though, this primordial creature suffers from a temporary, involuntary cessation of breathing. It is in these irregularly occurring apneic moments that the thresholds between spaces bridged by *L’hésitant* start to move across the glass ceiling; and, in synchronicity with the organism’s uneven breathing, the glass doors dividing the galleries turn from transparent to opaque with sputtering skips. This rhythmic aspiration gives the exhibition the semblance of a heterogeneous, self-interrupting breathing organism.

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NOTES:

1. Friedrich Kittler: *Die Nacht der Substanz* (Benteli Verlag, 1989), 5. My translation.
2. N. Katherine Hayles, “Traumas of Code,” *Critical Inquiry* vol. 33, no. 1, fall 2006: 136–57, 137.
3. Another speculative rapport to Surrealism was recently staged by Huyghe, in collaboration with curator Emma Lavigne, when he presented *Mind’s Eye (L)*, 2021, his monstrous, AI-generated sculpture comprising microorganisms from the *Umwelt* (2018–24) series, alongside a Surrealist landscape by Yves Tanguy from 1928 in the exhibition “Clair-obscur” at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris.
4. See Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis. An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, 1992, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Indiana University Press, 1995).
5. *Pierre Huyghe*, ed. Mouna Mekouar and Anne Stenne for the Fondation Beyeler (Hatje Cantz), 86.

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