

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

**MATTO**

*The Exhibition Is Not a Hysteric Object*

*Pierre Huyghe*

by Aldo Buscalferri and Dominika Hadelova (2021)

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## THE EXHIBITION IS NOT A HYSTERIC OBJECT PIERRE HUYGHE

Paris 6pm - Santiago 12am

We would like to speak with you about the translation of non-visual into visual. A thought becoming visual. A sensation being visualised. A data becoming a sensation. The absence of a person or an object that has been made visual, and thus present. As for example the weather in *Nymphéas Transplant* (2014)<sup>1</sup>; your work including representation of a weather data record from 1910s; or the woman's voice that was given and forever associated with a Disney character in *Blanche-Neige Lucie* (1997)<sup>2</sup>. Or the melted ice as all what remained from a ship sculpted in ice in *L'expédition scintillante* (2002).

I don't know how to answer precisely, but I am interested in the transitory state, in the in-between, something that is not and something that appears, between absence and presence, the vibration not the permanent state or the binary thinking that I find to be reductionist. As you said it goes with translation. I'm looking at leaks, porous objects and quasi subjects, spectrality. We tend to consider inexistant what is absent to our ability to sense it, or what is due to our lack of attention. *Umwelt*, for example, is a co-production of imagination between a human mind and an artificial intelligence. The "mental images" are visualized using neural networks, but it remains an interpretation as it goes through technological procedures and data. For other works the translation is more a material or biological transformation.



Pierre Huyghe, *Nymphéas Transplant* (12.21.19/14), 2014  
Aquarium, live fresh water organisms, light box, switchable glass, concrete.  
Courtesy of the artist, Faustin & Wirth, London, Photo Alex Delamaine

Pierre Huyghe, *Untilled Legendre Frauenakt*, 2012.  
Concrete cast on steel armature with beehive, live bee colony, plastic, and wax.  
Courtesy of the artist.



**You have worked regularly with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, who spoke of the defining power and impact of the architectural space where we have grown up on our mental organization as adults. Also our tendency to relate to similar structures. She speaks of "the theatre of the memory". You work with space, creating space. Would this question be applicable to your work? What is your "theatre of the memory"?**

It does, in a different way than Dominique as my relation to space is probably less memorial. I grew up in a serial house in the suburbs of Paris; the type of house that is the same as your neighbors. Somehow, you never get lost and only see the variations, the "tropicalization" to reference Dominique's idea. That house was at the edge of the countryside. I would spend a whole day alone in the forest, loose myself in plants, ground, worms, go to the city by subways and hang in foggy parking lots at night under artificial lights. My theater is the in-between, the *terrain vague*, the type of abandoned empty lot. There I attended early hip-hop and punk scene parties. I relate to these intermediary spaces. As Dominique said, these spaces influence and structure how you relate to things later. They are present in *Untilled* or *After A Life Ahead*, but the mental organization related to space is also associated to time-based situations, rituals and mediations you have experienced in your past.

**It is interesting that there is a relation between this what you are saying and the first question reply. There is a commonality of the in-between, the friction between two almost contradictory.**

It's a constant shift between the two. In-between is at the same time neither / or and a composite. It's an infinite milieu.

**You always work with "living elements" in your exhibitions. Be it a virus, an animal - to the visitor. And they have very different perceptions of the reality. The perception of what they see and experience.**

They are *unwelt*, the specific reality of the world given by their particular sense of the environment, so that three different entities, for example, could share the same place but do not share the same reality of it; a flu virus, a spider and a human. It's a theory by Von Uexküll that Deleuze took and Agamben developed in *The Open*. To overlap these *unwelts* exposed us to alterity, to difference. The work is made with a particular type of world experience, different cognitions, or has specific accesses for specific entities. The living elements are also the self-organization, reproduction, unpredictability, operations that became a part of my exhibitions. Things changing has been an interest for a long time. I tried for a while to program non-cyclic loops to choreograph events in the exhibition, but technology in early 2000 barely allowed something to be different each time, it was repetitive. I was trying to escape fixity or in exhibition to make things unstable, transitory, by using time, like sequences of films, lights, or electro-mechanical systems that somehow could activate the space, so it would be inhabited.

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Then I got interested in what generates things without knowing the outcome, something alive, not related to human, so the production of a work would be made by non-human entities with their own umwelt and mode of appearance, it would self-present. The outcome would not simply change but modify over time, and I would be able to capture the whole life of a thing rather than a moment or a representation of it. With machine learning, it's not repetitive anymore, something new and unpredictable is added each time. When machines perceive and react, then what it means to be living takes on another aspect, with the animals they both have umwelt.

**Were you never reluctant to work with these elements that are uncontrollable? In some way it's the very opposite to the artist striving to create a work that would represent his potential to the maximum in perfection.**

Maybe the perfection is in contingency, in confusing the process of making rather than pre-designing end point, in collective intelligence. I talked about losing control, but I decide to lose control, usually on the making and on some structural or esthetic intention, I still set up some conditions for things to occur. It's a displacement that allowed others to get in, non-human subjects but no master. How forms appear, their formations and their incompleteness, interest me. I doubt the monument and prefer ritual. A ritual modifies, not the pyramid, but as myths they are endlessly re-interpreted, circulating like a virus, they remained, and have a plasticity.

**But it's almost as if the ritual was like an animal, right? You need to feed it. You need to take care of it. The rituals are dependant on people to believe in them and keep them alive.**

The domesticated ones only.

**I would like to speak with you about the themes of reality and fiction. When the reality exceed the best fiction. The moment we live in right now. The power of story creating a reality. How does the human process what is reality and what is fiction? There is often the in between. Where does this sit in relation to your work? As an artist, you find yourself in that in between often, living the reality, but at the same time creating the fiction. There is something that coincides inside, that you carry the two. You can also transform opportunities which could seem completely fictional and surreal, but you can make them real.**

There's always an ambiguous game between the two. It's difficult to talk about this, as the definition of reality and fiction differ with each person, today even more. I understand fiction not as fantasy but as a vehicle to access inaccessible regions, thought as impossible. The given reality can be understood as one possibility of reality, and fictions as all the other realities. I use fiction in a speculative way, as "what could be", to open the reality to a difference, a surplus. There are many definitions of what reality is, Philip K. Dick said "reality is what doesn't go away when you stop believing in it", meaning everything else is believe based and Tristan Garcia "reality is what is indifferent to us". This indifference to us, seems essential, for a thing, or an exhibition, somehow a believe system, to produce its own reality. During the pandemic the given world has shifted so abruptly to another possibility of itself, that some people have had a moment of reality / fiction confusion. Suddenly it has appeared that vulnerability and uncertainty are the new common, as if uncertainty was not always in the nature of everything.

Pierre Huyghe, *Untitled (Human Mask)*, 2014, Film, color, sound, 19 minutes, Courtesy of the artist.

Previous double page: Pierre Huyghe, *After ALife Ahead*, 2017, Ice rink concrete floor, sand, clay, pneumatic water, bacteria, algae, bee colonies, chimera peacock, aquarium, black switchable glass, *Conus textile*, incubator, human cancer cells, genetic algorithm, Augmented Reality, automated ceiling structure, rain, ammoniac, logic game  
Courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery New York, Esther Schipper, Berlin; Hauser & Wirth, London; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Photo: Ola Rindal.

**What are your thoughts on the way gallery represents your work? On a website of a gallery, an image of your spatial work followed by a list of materials used: "Augmented reality, human cancer cells, aquarium, sand, clay, ice rink concrete floor, incubator, rain, logic game ...". In some way this almost becomes conceptual in itself I feel. It evokes sensations that have something to do with your work, but maybe at the same time not. It's also something that immediately makes this documentation image of a work into something easily understandable, a sort of shortcut, an image, a set of keywords, a reduction, something more commercial and approachable.**

Actually, that specific work, *After ALife Ahead*, was not done for profit. But I agree, ingredients do not taste like a dish and the image it might produce in the mind is not the work. There's always a reduction of what an artist has done into an easier mediated form, the trivial domestication of the work is almost inevitable. I only focus on the works phenomenological aspect, sometime its viral aspect. *After ALife Ahead* (2017) was a biological and technological environment in a hypothetical time ahead. It's an environment in which I tried to undifferentiate biotic and abiotic agents, life and non-life. You could navigate that haunted place, there were traces of technics, echoes of human presence or residual subjects in the form of cancer cells, and series of chemical reactions, biological processes, and automated operations. For example, augmented reality shapes were affecting physical elements and material, as cancer cells, metastases in a body. All were reacting, developing, they were entangled and at time interdependent. What remains of this work are images. One is definitely a shortcut of what it was. I have film not yet edited.

**How do you reflect on your work of the past years now after leaving New York where you have lived for a decade? Did you have any reflections since you moved to Chile.**

I primarily moved to a pandemic time as everyone else and didn't have the chance to start that reflection. It's in my nature to always doubt about what I do. Some works have more resilience and maintain a certain weirdness; they refuse to be fully processed or to reveal themselves, they are a sphinx, chimera, an enigma. Others gave everything and fainted away.

**It's almost similar to human relationships. Those we understood completely, we lose interest.**

Yes, it needs a zone of unknown, a reinvention of possibility or that the level of complexity in it keeps growing as you encounter it...or more attention.

**Did you ever think to stop making work, to stop having the entity of an artist. Because of this constant questioning yourself, feeling unsure - making work is constantly taking from the depth of yourself, an endless processing. Sometimes it's a tiring friend. But stopping art to become a musician or a scientist will not change the problem and I would probably get bored lying on a beach, so I can only try to transform it.**

**In an interview from 2004 you said: "Representation or images are now more important than the real events. Representation is dictating the event". How do you feel about this now? Do you think it has intensified?**

It's has. There was a growing deregulation of the classic linearity event, representation and commentary. Before, someone would paint an event and the society would comment on its representation. Now the relations between reality and image are ambiguous. The image triggers an event or is the event.

**When you create the structures and frameworks for your exhibitions, for something to happen, do you assume what will happen? What the reactions will be? Do you imagine what might happen? Do you imagine what you would like to happen?**

Once the exhibition appears, I don't know what will happen. I can imagine few possibilities of its evolution and for some parts I could anticipate certain types of behaviors within it, but not the reactions, if you are thinking of the public.

**Your exhibitions are not the occasion to show a final piece.**

No, I see exhibition as a living entity that produces reality. That was the whole idea of *The Association of Freed Times* (1995), to take the exhibition as a starting point rather than the end of a process. For example, *Temporary School, House or Home* or even the *No Ghost just a Shell* project. The format of exhibition could take different types of appearance, have different modalities of existence. The exhibition can generate possibilities and not only ones we can experience. And the exhibition can also be reinterpreted and mutate.

**Can they exist without public?**

As I was preparing *Untitled* for Documenta, I went through books on parks and gardens and realized none were interesting for what I was preparing. The nature of these places was overdesigned by and for an idea of the public. It's not the public in itself but the institution anticipating the encounter between the public and the work and constructing an epistemic separation. The addressability and the expectations bend the encounter, as do the duration, reliability, security, moralistic issues... all constraints an exhibition deals with.



I do not plan the exhibition, for or with the public. The exhibition is not a hysteric object that says: "look at me", its existence is not subjected to the gaze, it does not need to appear "for". It appears if it wishes, according to its mood or accidentally. To make the exhibition different, it needed to be indifferent to the public, which doesn't mean without public, but that the nature of the encounter and separation, the relation subject/object needed to be re-invented. It also requests someone being a raw witness. Aside this, to come back to *Untilled*, the non-human living organisms exhibit themselves for no one, they self-present... self-exhibit.

**What happens after the exhibitions to the living eco systems, to the living elements?**

The living elements go back to where it previously came from, which is not ideal. With certain types of living organisms or digital simulation it can go into a dormant state. The memory of what occurred before remains as they reappear. The ideal would be a permanent situation in places that offer a certain attention. This is the key.

**What are you working on at this moment?**

I'm working on an island, that is a place and an entity at the same time, a being-place. It's a physical habitat and a digital environment shaped by biological and algorithmic agents. It learns, modifies and generates something anew. I imagine the actual island being contaminated by another possibility of itself. A scenario explores what the habitat and its ecosystem could have become under different conditions of reality. For this, the entire island is digitalized, it's an echo of the physical one. Then a set of rules generate mutations that develop in the simulated environment, unbound from the reality biological and physical limitations. Some of the mutations are output from this digital milieu, printed in biomaterial and appear in the physical island where they will either decompose, grow and alter the biotope, deforming its image.

**How do you manage all these multidisciplinary fields? Do you manage everything alone? Or is a work of a team?**

It's the work of a team. My studio is the place to gather, think, research, organize and everything else goes to specialists in love with what they do.

**Is there someone that you exchange ideas and have conversations with on regular basis? It is often very helpful to be able to bounce your ideas and thoughts of someone, to develop them while speaking aloud but you need to have the correct person in front of you.**

Yes, conversations are essential. I regularly talk with friends, mainly artists from *Okayama Art Summit* and few others, like curator Anne Stenne and a molecular embryologist, Ali Brivanlou. We have conversations about chimera, cell geometry, assembly, artificial brains, human feathers, speculative biology. It's precious to have someone to bounce back with, I agree, it would be frightening to be trapped in your own mind. Otherwise the escape is through reading.

**What are you reading right now?**

Right now, the *Atlas of Anomalous AI* by Ben Vickers, *General Ecology, L'écho du réel*, Catherine Malabou, Paul B. Preciado, Reza Negarestani, a book on the weird, and often I end up at 4am on my phone reading blogs, listening to podcasts. It's like food.

**It makes me think of Neil Beloufa saying: "To wake up in the morning and to be free to think what I will do with my day, is a luxury".**

Yes, it is. Not everyone has that opportunity and I try to maintain it as much as I can.

**It's not only opportunity, there must be part of you in this too, it's active this effort to maintain this.**

Yes, definitely. It takes energy and awareness to maintain that state of freedom and playfulness.

*1Nymphéas Transplant* (2014) are living pond ecosystems, light box and switchable smart glass, containing fresh water, plants (including water lilies), fish, amphibians, crustaceans and insects. The water has a slight greenish color. The work is based on Claude Monet's water lilies in Giverny and the real data of weather changes in Giverny from 1914 to 1918, the time of World War I. The switchable glass blinks randomly and the lightbox provides light and heat according to the weather report. The idea of an overcast, a storm or a sunny day is visualized.

*2Blanche-Neige Lucie* is a documentary chronicle about Lucie Dolène, the French interpreter of Disney's Snow White. She gave her voice to this imaginary character and in this documentary, she speaks out about her work and defends herself against the use that has been made of her voice.

Pierre Huyghe, *Of Ideal* 2019-ongoing. Deep image reconstructions, real-time generated reconstructions, face recognition, screens, sensors, sound. Exhibition view IF THE SNAKE, Okayama Art Summit, 2019. Courtesy of the artist, Ishikawa collection. Copyright: Kamitani Lab / Kyoto. Photo: Ola Rindal.

