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DEATH IS GBP 16





POTRAIT
PIERRE
HUYGHE



Pierre Huyghe's long-running testament to the feedback loops between humans, nature, and technologies advocates giving in to entanglement. His most recent work is a part-organic, part-synthetic, all-symbiotic forest that does not distinguish reindeer bones from bone-like sculptures, hot-pink beehives from those made of wax. So, why greet machine intelligence as anything other than an ally?

By Ruby Justice Thelot

Variants, 2021–ongoing, scanned forest, real-time simulation, generative mutation and sounds, intelligent camera, environmental sensors, animals, plants, micro-organisms and materialized mutations: synthetic and biological material aggregate

As a child, it was a thrill to get really low to the ground, laying almost completely flat, and rip through the green, uniformly manicured grass of my local public park. Beneath it, I found plenty of critters, tiny bugs and insects roaming in an underground, organized society teeming within tens of millions of micro-organisms, a world invisible to most city dwellers. Whereas we inhabit our world certain of the exceptional unicity of human intelligence, French artist Pierre Huyghe (*1962) has sought in his work to create environments, or milieux, where the interconnections between different forms of intelligence are made salient to a human audience.

Beginning with *Untilled (Liegender Frauenakt)* (2012), a gray concrete sculpture of a reclining female nude whose head is replaced with an active beehive, Huyghe's installations have pressed the public to confront the intricacies of non-human lifeforms. In the work, bees inhabit a round, multi-chamber structure with hexagonal cavities and can be seen swarming to and fro, scaring onlookers into recoil, collecting pollen from neighboring plants, and slowly increasing the size of the hive, in direct collaboration with a human sculptor, notably absent. The swarm, rather than the artist, acts as the head of the sculpture, its brain, interpolated as formal collage. The yellow hive rests on the statue's shoulders, its organic, irregular shape clashing with the figure's smooth, conventional form, pulling on the deeply entwined histories of honeybees and humans and rendering convergence, rather than deviation, as its evolutionary plot.

This interdependent union is likewise made conspicuous in one of his most recent works, *Variants* (2021–), a milieu of animals, insects, plants, and micro-organisms cohabitating with artificial intelligence. The work is installed on a small island near the Kistefos Museum, northwest of Oslo. On the island, the scenery is damp and lush; thin trees protrude on walking paths, and frequent floods leave puddles of water among piles of jagged rocks. Everything has been left as it was, from rotting logs and derelict boats to the metal remnants of a pulp factory that closed seventy years ago.

A 3D scan of the location plays in an evolving loop on a large screen at the high point of the island. The surrounding evergreen trees and uneven, light-brown soil frame a dark, imposing digital display, on which a light-colored, pointillist representation of the site is dizzyingly traversed by an autonomous eye. Through generative adversarial networks (GANs) and diffusion models like DALL-E, *Variants* creates new elements in its simulation that are subsequently

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integrated in the physical environment all around the island: Pseudo-organic blobs appear on large, fallen branches and pink hive-like structures start hanging from trees where honeybees build new homes. These alterations to the environment, in turn, are picked up by sensors that capture indicators such as water level, soil toxicity, wind levels, and sun exposure. Huyghe melds the ecosystem with the technosystem by highlighting the permeability between the simulated and physical worlds, with the former slowly seeping into the latter. The audience, too, is a part of this, as human presence invariably changes the ecosystemic data.

Huyghe combines simulation and AI with an enclosed natural environment, the symbiosis within the system (biome, simulation, objects) creating novel dynamic inputs that are processed by the automated generative system. The cycle will evolve until, presumably, one of the elements fails. But which will do so first?

The system opposes our usual definition of “intelligence” by juxtaposing machine, human, and non-human biological intelligences in interconnected environments. More broadly, Huyghe's work rejects man-machine and man-nature binaries and centers a more holistic understanding of species' interdependence, simulated and otherwise. He doesn't conduct the movements of the agents, so much as construct set-ups where their behaviors can occur. Even in his own explanations, Huyghe seems to relinquish responsibility; the systems, automated by machine algorithms and biological metabolisms, take on lives all their own, guided by forces often beyond human comprehension. We are merely participant observers in such context, a part of the whole.

In creating feedback loops and cycles of exchange between nature, man, and machine, Huyghe reminds us, in his own words, that “nature [and perhaps technology] leaks in,” not because we include it, but “because there is no separation.” The recent inclusion of AI technologies in his work seems to indicate that our cultural fears toward it may be misplaced and that, should machine “intelligence” materialize, it will be less about competition than exchange. Unlike GANs, the networks we build with other entities should not be adversarial, but collaborative and interdependent. —

PIERRE HUYGHE (*1962, Paris) is an artist living in Santiago, Chile. Recent solo shows took place at Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Espoo (2023); Kistefos Museum, Jevnaker (2022); LUMA, Arles (2021). Recent group shows include “FUTURA. Measuring Time,” Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg (2022); “Fractional Expressions,” Castello di Rivoli, Turin (2022); Singapore Biennale, Singapore Art Museum (2022).

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After UUmwelt, 2021, deep image reconstructions, materialized deep image reconstructions (glass, synthetic resin, silicone, copper alloy, colophonium, minerals, bone, calcium, protein, sodium, sugar, agar agar, bacteria), generative adversarial network, face recognition, screens, sound, sensors, human cancer cells (HeLa), incubator, scent, bees, ants, mycelium, soil, pigment. Installation view, LUMA Foundation, Arles, 2021

Courtesy: the artist; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Hauser & Wirth, London



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Of Ideal, 2019-ongoing, deep image reconstructions, real-time generated reconstructions, face recognition, screens, sensors, sound. Installation view, “IF THE SNAKE,” Okayama Art Summit, 2019