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theartsection
An Online Journal of Art and Cultural Commentary

Pierre Huyghe with Michaël Amy

by Michaël Amy (November 15, 2021)



Pierre Huyghe Photo: Ola Rindal

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Pierre Huyghe, *Untitled*, 2011–2012, living entities and inanimate things, made and not made, commissioned and produced by documenta (13) with the support of Colección CIAC AC, Mexico; Fondation Louis Vuitton pour la création, Paris; Ishikawa Collection, Okayama, Japan
Courtesy of the artist © the artist

The French contemporary artist Pierre Huyghe enjoys international acclaim, witness the many one-person and group exhibitions in which his work has been featured, and the prizes he has been awarded. His workplace in New York City, where this interview was conducted on January 20th, 2017, is an office where research and thinking take place and not a studio where things are made. The work Huyghe and/or others produce following his directives seems based upon raising questions, but what these are is unclear. Therefore, what the answers are is equally so.

Huyghe's movies and installations are intriguing, slightly mysterious, mystifying and alluring. Interviews with the artist may be one means of reconstructing Huyghe's intentions, or at least of learning what he cares to share with us, indirection in matters artistic having its virtues and charms. Huyghe's projects may include ready-made objects, sculpture, film, photographs, drawings, sound, text, music, live animals and plants, and the natural or man-made environment. Relationships, connections, roles and role-playing and make-believe, causes and effects, memory versus history and contemporary reality, recollection and the creation of fictions, growth and break down, science, technology, culture, and--ultimately--meaning, may be explored in these works, which are often set up as time-based situations. Settings, systems, and context being important to him, Huyghe also examines, exposes or subverts the make-up and trappings of exhibitions, their spaces, and the power structures and ideas behind these, in teasingly ambiguous ways.

Huyghe's emotional range extends from a cold, occasionally intellectualizing aloofness to the grotesque (with fantastical, sci-fi, or popular culture ingredients), or the elegiac, the latter in Huyghe's contemplations of nature or built environments, their threatened state or status often being implied. I opened this interview with the words *La bataille est engagée* (the battle has begun), thereby playfully alluding to the French essayist Georges Bataille, as a volume of the latter's collected writings in the Gallimard edition was lying between us on the table.

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Michaël Amy: Film plays an important role in your aesthetic.

Pierre Huyghe: In what regard?

MA: Well, you make movies, and you refer to other movie-makers –either directly, or indirectly. I am thinking of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Wim Wenders, Alfred Hitchcock, and perhaps -through Hitchcock- to François Truffaut.

PH: With regard to Alfred Hitchcock, yes, I dealt with Hitchcock in the specific work that I did (*Remake*, 1995). After that, in terms of my personal interests, I am not that interested in Hitchcock, and definitely not in Wenders (chuckle). But that's fine.

MA: Why make these references, if you are not deeply engaged with these filmmakers?

PH: Because I am interested in the structure of film. For example, Wenders made a movie (*The American Friend*, 1977) in which a *jump cut* appears; the French term for this is *ellipse*, which is a classic time-based figure in film, and *L'Ellipse* (1998) became the title of the work I produced, which includes material I filmed that fills the gap in Wenders' movie. You are in New York, and in the next scene you are in Paris -you are not going to film the eight or six hours of flight between New York and Paris; that is called a *jump cut* in cinema. It's a classic time-based language.

MA: I'm wondering to what extent French avant-garde film marked you as an artist.

PH: It definitely did. I often went to the *Cinémathèque*. I spent two years going there, almost weekly. I am more into Godard than Truffaut –I am less of a Truffaut person (chuckle). There wasn't only French cinema; there was also Italian *nouveau réalisme*, when I was going to the *Cinémathèque*, there was Cassavetes in the US, which offered a kind of parallel to that, I was also looking at Japanese *New Wave* cinema. I was seeing these movies and studying along, as a self-taught artist. I was also looking at cinema of my own time -not only at cinema of the Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies. My time was when David Lynch and Lars von Trier got started –von Trier is the filmmaker I still look at today (chuckle). Cinema was something I wanted to do at one point, before I contemplated entering art school.

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MA: I bring up the French new wave because your work is engaged with theory, with ideas, I almost see you as an essayist.

PH: I now see why you were mentioning that kind of cinema.

MA: I am thinking of how you structure your narratives. Your work is difficult -it keeps one suspended; it does not deliver its fruits at once; it requires quite some patience on the part of the beholder. I am also thinking in terms of *le nouveau roman*. Was this important to you?

PH: The *nouveau roman* is of the same moment. Now that we touched upon the *nouvelle vague*, we can talk about *le nouveau roman*. It is something we went through -being born in France. Don't forget that the generation you are referring to came before mine. That was the background you would study or talk about with friends -as a reference point, or as a structural model. You mentioned the essay-form. I never thought about that. What came first? Did literature impact the way cinema re-thinks narrative structure? I don't even want to speak about narrative. I prefer to think of the net you throw over reality to try to catch and bring back that reality. I'm assuming there is a back and forth between the *nouveau roman* and *la nouvelle vague*. Chris Marker was perhaps influenced by it. When we think of cinema as essay, the term you introduced, that's what Marker does -he builds up a cinematic essay. In France, there is this aquarium you swim in. France was of course very strong in the generation before mine in the areas of literature, cinema, and philosophy. These things were swimming in the same pool. These things were not separated. There was a network of ideas across fields.



Pierre Huyghe, *After Dream*, 1997, 47 wind chimes, 288 aluminum tubes, various lengths and diameters
Exhibition copy courtesy of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Cultural Centre of Belgrade Venue: Park, Museum of Yugoslavia
Photo credits: Nemanja Knežević © the artist

MA: You cross fields. You strike up partnerships with other artists, with scientists, with people working in other disciplines.

PH: Sure. Out of curiosity. I am interested in people who invent things -whatever the field. You have people who invent within their specific fields, in cinema, in philosophy, each inventing in a particular way, and putting in doubt something that was perceived as a truth, stability, a fixed idea, something that one took for granted -this can be achieved by way of a work of art, or a novel, or a philosophical approach in science. Something that is stable, grounded in one place, suddenly can become something different. To be able to shift one's way of thinking, to change the paradigm, is most exciting. That's what interests me. Offering another way of thinking about things. Not what something is, but what something could become.

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MA: Text plays an important role in your work, as does explanation.

PH: Text yes, explanation no (chuckle). I am not sure I want to explain.

MA: You set up a situation.

PH: Yes -that is different.

MA: Your texts read almost like theater directions. You set up a scene.

PH: I see what you mean. It's true: I establish a conditional set up, a construct. I'm interested in instruction. I set up a program, which is another form of instruction. I'm interested in behaviors -in animal behaviors. Each time, something triggers something. It is not easy to talk about this, as we are covering thirty years of practice, and something I say could apply to one body of work and not to another. The last few years, I try to get less and less involved in controlling that situation. I have always tried to offer the condition, and the work comes from that condition. I define the condition under which the work will occur, and eventually there is the formation of something. There is a movement, there is a trajectory, rather than a formal intention. These last few years, I have tried to step a step back in defining the condition under which the work will emerge.

MA: You use words, language.

PH: There are so many ways to answer the question about the importance of words, as I read, and I very often start my work by writing notes. The location we find ourselves in right now, you can see, is not the place where we make things. (Amy: We are in a rather large, open, informal office space, with several tables, and computers, and shelves with books). I never had a place where things are made (chuckles). I need a table, a piece of paper, a pen, and I write down ideas

MA: You are an artist-scholar –someone who engages in research.

PH: I am.

MA: Do you see yourself as a conceptual artist?

PH: Not in the historical sense. Not as someone who fits the label.

MA: Would you be unhappy if we put you in the class of Neo-Conceptual artists?

PH: That wouldn't be good (chuckle).

MA: Why?

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PH: Because of the word “neo”, and because the word “conceptual” is associated with a very specific period. There is actually a shift in the use of language -namely in using language for the visualization of the work. I don’t think my work goes in that direction -not in the direction of Laurence Weiner, not in the direction of *Art and Language*, not in the direction of Joseph Kosuth, not that I do not like those artists; I actually learned from their works, and respect their works, and I have learned from the shift that has been operated there, even as a form of tautology. So, no, I do not consider myself to be a conceptual artist, historically speaking.

MA: Does Pierre Huyghe have a style? Can I enter a museum and see on the other side of the hall a work that I can identify as a work by Pierre Huyghe, for these and these reasons? Or do you avoid a signature-style?

PH: Twenty-five years ago, there was a moment when I was trying to avoid that. It was something that I thought of. I do not know if I succeeded. It cannot be an intention. It is too weak as an intention. What I am trying to say is that I do not know if I have a style -it is not something I think of. Perhaps this is the way to be most clear about it: I am not conscious of it. It is not an issue.

MA: Is there Pierre Huyghe subject matter? A thematic?

PH: It will come by default. There are recurring things -by default. I recognize that when I flip through a catalogue of my work. In five seconds, I can see that this person is apparently obsessed by a few things.

MA: What are those things?

PH: I am not into establishing territory. I don’t want to be the person who is the specialist in this or that area. I am just a person who happens to be interested in different things.

MA: Could you list which things we are talking about?

PH: I would rather not. But I can see recurrences.

MA: Do you provide social criticism through your work? Do you see yourself as a social activist?

PH: No, I don’t think so. Definitely not.

MA: Is your work politically engaged? Does it offer a critique of the present situation?

PH: I am not interested in commenting on what is happening today. (Amy: This interview was recorded during the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States). My work is political in a broader sense, as an organization, as a distribution of goods or ideas among a spectrum of people, and even in that form, I will not address politics directly. The work that I did at *documenta* can be read in a political way (*Untilled*, 2011-2012).

MA: You welcome different readings of your work.

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PH: Yes, I do. I am not a critic of activist artists –I understand what they are doing, and respect it, to a certain extent. But theirs is not an approach I am interested in pursuing, because it locks you in. You make the action prisoner of the object the action is supposed to criticize. You will be forever a prisoner of that object. I don't want to be a part of that. I rather see the thinking in a broader way. But that does not at all mean that I do not have thoughts about the things that are going on around me. What I think is not absent from what I do. But I don't want to produce propaganda.

MA: Your work deals with alienation, at times with dysfunction, and with the unrealized goals of modernism –I am thinking of your work focusing on the abandoned houses along the Mediterranean coast.

PH: Yes, of course -it's the condition we all share, right? You are absolutely right to ask this question right after the previous one. A certain form of deregulation around the Mediterranean Sea, amounts -for different reasons- to a specific style. It was interesting to observe that style rather than to have one of my own. That style was the outcome of certain conditions: The dryness of the climate, economic deregulation, the instability of the ground that necessitated the use of low walls, the risk of earthquakes, etc. For multiple reasons, natural or cultural -which cannot be separated- you have something that is made and that has a particular style. This very interesting style consists in the actually unfinished. This Corbusier-like, modular structure, is in the act of becoming –it's an architecture that is always in the movement of becoming. It is never finished. This is not ready to be used. Instead, this is something that is endlessly potential.

MA: Which is what your work is ultimately about. You are interested in impermanence, in situations that remain in flux, in *la durée*.

PH: Yes, I am interested in something that is not installed in a certain way. It's funny, in art we have this word *installation* (chuckle) –we use it when we do not know what the artist is doing (laughs). To me, it is a very frightening word, because to me *installer* means to settle in. Such as when you settle into a language –you use words because of an expression, because it's a routine, because it's a habit, a habit of thought, it is fixed and inert in a certain way. I am interested in something that will grow, that will change, that will evolve. Everything is changing, even in decay, even in an entropic way -whatever. I want to maintain a trajectory within the work, so that everything has the potential for change.

MA: Chance, as well as change?

PH: Chance less in the sense of Cage. In Cage, chance is a tool to construct a composition. When we think chance, we think Cage, or I think Cage, meaning thinking that a thing can be improvised at random, which is not completely true. The I-Ching is an early computation system. Cage used that system to compose. Once his score was written, it was interpreted by a musician in a very precise way. Contingency rather than chance is the method you start off with. And then, of course, one changes.

MA: Who are the artists who have marked you?

PH: Smithson.

MA: Because Smithson engages with nature? Is that something you are interested in?

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PH: I am not so interested in nature. Smithson is important for matters having to do with scale, for a certain relation to time, for the relation to site/non-site, for the relation to entropy, which is time again. Duchamp is important, as for any artist, I assume. I have reduced my spectrum (laughs).

MA: You are interested in thinkers.

PH: We were talking about John Cage. Yes, John Cage is important. I was interested in Foucault and Deleuze when I was young. I still read them, flicking through the pages (chuckles). That's how I read. Those are the only things I read.

MA: Do you read novels?

PH: Not so much. If I do, it is mainly science fiction, mainly speculative. I used to read a lot of cinema theory. A little about art, though not so much. Yes, you are right, mainly thinkers.

MA: How do you feel about technology? Your work engages with technology.

PH: Technology is always present. I see it as a natural constituent of being human.

MA: You will be receiving an award for your work in sculpture. One does not think of you as a sculptor. How would you describe your work as a sculptor? What constitutes sculpture today if Pierre Huyghe receives such a major award? (Amy: The *2017 Nasher Sculpture Prize*).

PH: It's funny. We like to categorize. I try to escape from the notion of separation: Nature/culture, subject/object, the classification of knowledge; different epistemologies. And then we have the classifications: Conceptual Art, sculpture, and then we think that we have actually said something when we state that this person is a conceptual artist. We feel secure. Case closed. If you try to avoid this form of classification as much as you possibly can, you make no sense (chuckle). It's the same with everything. Yesterday, someone referred to the US presidential inauguration as something that would be *poetic*, as if it were a work by Rimbaud, and in France the Front National is said to be about *freedom*. We need to develop the terms we use. It's the same with the word *sculpture* -where does that word come from, what does that term cover, and what are its limits? Once that is defined, you can ask me that question. There is a limit as to what that category covers. You can make that limit explicit. To answer your question, Beuys has spoken of social sculpture; thus, sculpture means everything. In that case, yes, I make sculpture. What I did at *Documenta* can, to a certain extent, be experienced as something that you go through, it has a certain physicality, it is not fixed, it's an organism that changes or evolves. I recently discovered that I have always been interested in the many; many as opposed to one. That characterizes my work.

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Pierre Huyghe, *Streamside Day*, 2003, Event, celebration, October 11, 2003, Streamside Knolls, USA,
Courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York © the artist

MA: You are interested in relationships between things, connections.

PH: I am interested in interdependence -this thing needs that thing, and that thing needs this thing, as in an organism. I can go back quite far in my work and realize that that was always present. That set of things is not static –it is always in formation, the things are interdependent, or interconnected, and constitute a network, or mesh, of something. Things are not static. That is recurrent in what I do. It can be in a film; though movies have a certain limit, as do books –there is a certain linearity to flipping the page, or in a movie to seeing a shot, after a shot, after a shot. There is something that is quite annoying to me in the structure of a single film. The exhibition needs to be formatted; it requires a garden-like approach; or the exhibition needs to become as a living organism. That is something I feel closer to.

MA: Because you can go in different directions.

PH: Exactly. You can go in different directions. You don't need to start at the beginning and then get locked into linearity. You can move in different directions, and as you do so, things around you also move in different directions. In a movie theater, you don't move -what is projected on the screen in front of you moves, while you stay in place. At the theater, it is the same, while in a museum you move, and the objects don't move. Dada divided that division. I am in a certain way trying to get rid of that division. I am interested in the displacement of each.

MA: Speaking of displacement, you fly from Paris to New York City with some regularity. Do you need to immerse yourself in another culture in order to reboot?

PH: You could say that. Today, it is very strange to say that (laughs), as I do not know how to reboot here. A different condition surrounds you and you change the condition of the work. Being in different contexts allows for new encounters that shift the way I am thinking, which I need.

MA: You were going to tell us more about your ideas about nature that are embodied in your work.

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PH: Modernity separated nature from culture. That we know. That division is an arbitrary division. During *Documenta*, people asked me about nature because the work I exhibited there included some plants and animals -as if that were proof that I am interested in nature.

MA: At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, you allowed nature to take over the rooftop of culture (*The Roof Garden Commission*, 2015).

PH: (Laughs). Right. Nature leaks in, because there is no separation, and goes through the museum. Timothy Morton talks about the hyper-object. There is a very easy way to read nature. Man is in control of everything, he has manufactured nature, he is everywhere, so there is no more nature. It's funny, because people associate nature with what is living, the tree living in the park, though the City of New York planted it there. So, these relations are complicated. When I did *Streamside Day* (a short film of 2003) in Upstate New York, it was already there: People were going back to the forest, but those trees were planted one hundred years ago, and they think that they are going back to the wilderness -a fantasy of the wilderness- but it is a highly protected wilderness, and actually it is a human-made wilderness. Recently, I have been interested in what is living. You asked me about technology. Around 2000, I was using a program to shift time as another element in an exhibition -the time of appearance and disappearance- so that I could arrive at a kind of choreography of an exhibition. I could choreograph the elements: Lights, sound, film, machines. I could orchestrate. The American writer Norman Kline was talking about scripted space at that time. Then I got rid of that and got into more human instruction. Then, at *Documenta* (*Untilled*, 2011-2012), I slowly got into instinctual behavior. The bee is going to do this and this, the plant will do that, because of photosynthesis the leaves are going to go like that, the soil will fold like this, the ants need to transport that thing from there to there. So, you don't orchestrate anymore (chuckle), because you are not in control, but you know that those elements are there, or you eventually put them there; there is a certain rhythmic -a certain rhythm that will occur. That is what interested me at the time of *Documenta* -rather than just going back to nature (chuckle). Living can be biotic, and abiotic. I am interested in different living-rhythms. I am slowly trying to see how an exhibition can become an organism, eventually have an illness and eventually die, and eventually reproduce.

MA: A cycle?

PH: Not even a cycle, because a cycle is closed -like a loop. It has to be a cycle that includes change. We are talking about some form of evolution -a set of things. It is very difficult for me to speak today of an ecosystem or organism. An organism is made of an ecosystem of bacteria. It is a scale problem. I am going after a set of things that are made, or are partly made, are partly intentional, sustain time, and are evolving, changing, growing. Nature interested me less. Instead, over the last few years, I aimed to create a living organism in a certain way.

MA: Does your work provide an institutional critique of the museum?

PH: No. Too old (chuckle).

MA: But you are testing the limits. You must have had curators and directors tell you that you cannot do *this*; that *this* is not possible?

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PH: An institutional critique intentionally triggers something to show the limits of the institution itself, or criticize different aspects of the institution, on political grounds, or whatever. We can go back to the avant-garde, to the Sixties, etc., etc. Directly confronting the institution isn't something that I remain interested in. I practiced a type of institutional critique, I think, when I considered the exhibition as an object, as a format; by default, you will come into friction with what the institution will allow the artist to manifest. But we were talking about a positive, or negative possibility. Today, to enter into a confrontation with the institution, as constituting the subject of an exhibition, seems too narrow an aim to me. I still think it is interesting to make explicit the mediation between a subject and an object, which is the exhibition. This may be a more Brechtian approach. But that is not the subject of the work. Otherwise, and that is what we were talking about earlier, I become a prisoner of the object, of the critic. I am simply focusing on what I do. But as you said before, when you bring a spider, or an aquarium, or an image that should not be seen -depending on the local condition: There it would be OK, while over there it would not be OK- you are confronted with resistance. So, it is never intentional -as far as I am concerned. It would be too much like biting the cage (laughs).

MA: You are prone to tweak your earlier work.

PH: Yes, to a certain extent.

MA: So, in your view, the work is never finished?

PH: This is an interesting question. I recently thought that I could go even further. Like really change the work completely. Such as that blob over there: I should just cut it off. I think I should do that even more.

MA: Because you are changing?

PH: My intention is not to readjust the mistakes of the past –because you have your present mistakes. But you can reconfigure things differently. It is not to erase things that you think no longer work - actually, it may be more interesting to keep the mistakes. I don't want to use the word *impermanence* in a Buddhist way (chuckle). To me, to take a work of mine and to completely modify it does not constitute a problem. What you mentioned refers to little things that I have done.

MA: So, it has more to do with the new context in which the work will be shown than with where you find yourself in your thinking at a given time?

PH: Yes, but it would not be to adapt to a specific audience, or to a specific cultural context. That I will never do. I am not television.

MA: So, is it in response to the geography of the space?

PH: It is always about the idea that I want to convey. It could have to do with the space, its physicality, its temporalities. At the end, to me, it has more to do with trajectory than with form. Definitely not -to any great extent- with the cultural context, because that is what television does. That's not art. That's different –to me.

MA: All works of art engage with memory. Yours do so in a particular way, don't they?

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PH: Yeah, this question of memory... I did a work called *The Third Memory* (two-channel video installation, 1999). I thought, at the time, that it was more in reference to the idea of the third meaning in Barthes. That work examined an actual hold-up in Flatbush, Brooklyn, in 1972. The interesting thing is that the person who committed that robbery was inspired by the movie *The Godfather*, which he saw in a movie theater. Then, this person went on to carry out this bank robbery. A television crew arrived during the robbery, and the person is filmed during the robbery acting in a certain way. Then, Sidney Lumet made a movie that was inspired by this event, and I asked the person who had committed the robbery to re-enact his actions. By that time, of course, his memory was embedded with fiction. That lapsus is perfect -in a certain way. In order to reconstruct his actual memory of the event, he went back to a fictional work. That is a state that -at the time- I thought we were all swimming in. As far as memory is concerned, I used cultural elements to a greater extent in my previous works. These did not constitute a reference back to something. At the time, I considered that the landscape we were walking in was a mediated landscape. My sources were mediated sources -they were already crafted. I was not going to paint a mountain in the south of France, but engaged instead with different mediated forms. That position is less present in my work today. I use different sources now, and a different methodology -a different model, or structure. I was interested not only in the symptom, but also in seeing the condition under which that source -a film, a book, a music score- comes to us. Modernity constitutes one structure, one model, one kind of network. I became more interested in modernity as a whole than in a specific film or piece of music.



Pierre Huyghe, *The Third Memory*, 1999, Film, double projection, 9 min., color, sound, paper archives, 22 min. Courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York © the artist

MA: Do you embrace the label post-modern, or is that also very dated?

PH: It's very dated (chuckle). Someone I really like is Lyotard. He mounted a very beautiful and interesting exhibition called *Les immatériaux*. I do not see myself as post-modern, though I belong to that era.

MA: Has modernism failed?

PH: To a certain extent, yes. What we keep from modernity, and what we keep from post-modernity, is Bruno Latour. His book *We Have Never Been Modern* is a way to reconsider all of that: What should we keep from modernity, and what should we keep from post-modernity, and what shall we build from that? The beginning of modernity, in the early 19th century, is the beginning of separation.

MA: Do you mean the separation from what came before?

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PH: No, the separation nature/culture, subject/object, the separation us/the others; in Amazonia: Us/the others; the animals: Us/the others; the women.

MA: But the Greeks did that, in antiquity. Nature was something that you kept at bay.

PH: Maybe modernity tried to create something that was an ontology and an epistemology. Modernity tried to make rationality become the truth, as if it were the truth, as if it were an ontology -but it is not. That has consequences. To me modernity is a very damaging process. When I think of the exhibition as a dynamic format, I try to see beyond modernity -beyond a Euro-centric mode of thinking. I am trying to see if there is another way to approach the exhibition, or art, that could in a way be something else than under that model of thinking that we have been trying out for the last couple of centuries.

Brooklyn, New York, January 20, 2017