

ARTFORUM

Edge of Glory

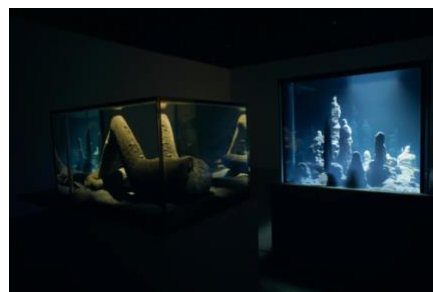
Pierre Huyghe's "Liminal"

by Cornelia Lauf (June 5, 2024)



Pierre Huyghe, *Offspring*, 2018, sensor, self-generative system for sound and light. Installation view, Punta della Dogana, Venice, 2024. Photo: Ola Rindal.

IF THE END OF THE WORLD IS NEAR, then Pierre Huyghe has announced it. In the colossal installation “Liminal” at the Punta della Dogana in Venice, the French artist offers a darkened postapocalyptic landscape whose denizens include a pair of crustaceans inching around a spooky fish tank, some blissfully ignorant Mexican tetras, and footage of a monkey outfitted with resin face mask, ambling petulantly through the abandoned restaurant of a Japanese shore town hit by a tsunami. All bets are off in this wasteland, as Huyghe blithely skips through the history of visual culture, current events, and technology, claiming all for himself without qualms. Is he entitled to depict a naked woman, portrayed with her face obliterated, in a nocturnal lunar landscape? May he reference colonial tropes such as *chinoiserie*, *japonisme*, or *singerie*, or use live animals at all without making a case for animal rights? In the video occupying the show’s final room we see a skeleton in a desert, its only companion an AI-automated crane that picks up and drops crystal balls. No one is there to read them, despite their promise for augury. But whose skeleton is this, and shouldn’t its identity be itemized, perhaps with a sign?



View of “Pierre Huyghe: Liminal,” 2024, Punta della Dogana, Venice. From left: *Abyssal Plane*, 2015; *Circadian Dilemma (el Día del Ojo)* (the Day of the Eye), 2017. Photo: Ola Rindal.

No, Huyghe is beyond moralizing, and impervious to the wave of platitudes that have washed over the world of art. His is a bone-scavenging of a nonautomated type, an intellectual scavenging that picks and chooses among artistic corollaries throughout a moodily powerful survey. Earlier pieces are interspersed with new works in a merging of fiction and reality and with an atemporal rhythm, hallmarks of Huyghe's careful syncopation. This artist is deeply aware of history—the history not only of art, but of other forms of visual culture, cinema chief among them. A giant, naked, masked nude, locked in a lunar landscape, sets a sci-fi and fantasy mood in *Liminal*, 2024. A second darkened environment features likewise masked actors clad in Bottega Veneta suits, murmuring (though the voices are computer-generated) something that sounds like “tush,” with a spectral effect reminiscent of Tony Oursler. The Kraftwerk look-alikes are lined against the back wall; in the middle of the blackened room stands *Portal*, 2024, an AI-programmed sensory antenna appearing like a sculptural collaboration between Constantin Brancusi and Fritz Lang. The next spatial grotto features the simian *Human Mask*, 2014, and conjures *Planet of the Apes* (1968), but also Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). Elsewhere there are echoes of David Lynch and Peter Greenaway, not to mention the desert images of Robert Smithson, the skeleton works of Gino de Dominicis, the fish tanks occupied by Jeff Koons's basketballs or Damien Hirst's shark, and Olafur Eliasson's fog machines. Huyghe's vision has the scope of a William Blake, ranging from a filmic close-up of amber and the insects trapped within it to the astral macrocosm. Yet somehow we feel that Huyghe just wants to commune with artist friends and others he admires, whether Angela Bulloch or Francis Bacon. That's the aspect of his work I've always found most fascinating: the way it turns away from individual authorship toward a broader sense of collaboration across time and space. A sharp catalogue, designed by Irma Boom and edited by Anne Stenne, the project's curator, bears witness to the artist's many decades of thinking. As much a monograph as an artist's book, it's also a volume of philosophy in the hallowed theory-buttrussing of Conceptual art. And in it, we are far from any pessimism about the world's potential end. Huyghe's late-capitalist oeuvre is an extraordinary manufacture, with vast resources marshaled across many continents and fields. Unbridled optimism is the actual hallmark of its auteur. Things are far from over, we see here, and the writers, galleries, collectors, institutions, photographers, and others mobilized by Huyghe are hardly throwing in the towel. Tomorrow's potential bleakness prompts Huyghe's antidote, a vigorous and forthright declaration of hope.