

# FRIEZE

## *Inside the Dark Vision of Pierre Huyghe*

*The artist has turned Punta della Dogana in Venice into a world of autonomous AI installations and isolated marine creatures*

by Sean Burns (April 25, 2024)



Main image: Pierre Huyghe, *De-Extinction*, 2014, film still. Courtesy: © Pierre Huyghe, by SIAE 2023; Pinault Collection; Anna Lena Films, Paris; photograph: Ola Rindal

A pale tetra fish swims around a vast obsidian tank, while another bobs on its side at the top of the water, perhaps ailing from debilitating swim bladder disease (*Circadian Dilemma [El Día del Ojo]*, 2017). Nearby, *Zoodram 6* (2013) consists of a smaller container in which a hermit crab lumbers under the heavy weight of its shell: a hollowed-out, resin version of Constantin Brâncuși's early modernist bronze *Sleeping Muse* (1910). The crab's twitching antennae is seemingly the only one of its appendages able to move under the art-historical load on its back, both a protection and a burden.

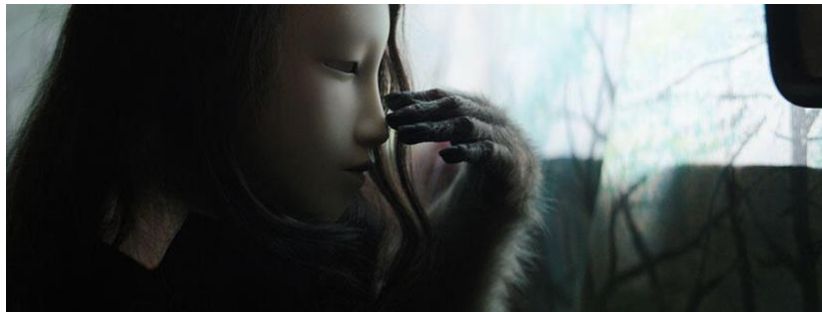


Pierre Huyghe, *Abyssal Plane*, 2015, *Circadian Dilemma (el Día del Ojo)*, 2017, installation view, 'Pierre Huyghe. Liminal', 2024, Punta della Dogana, Venezia. Courtesy: Palazzo Grassi, Pinault Collection; photograph: Ola Rindal

Though other lifeforms creep around these rocky terrains, including arrow crabs and starfish, a strangely comforting sense of loneliness pervades Pierre Huyghe's solo show, 'Liminal', (a collaboration with curator Anne Stenne) at Punta della Dogana, itself an isolated building on a blustery Venetian promontory. After reading the exhibition's accompanying text, I learned that some of the tetras are blind, a genetic mutation resulting from their species living in underwater caves in Mexico for millions of years. The tank is fitted with switchable glass that responds to its surroundings, flitting between a view of illuminated rockery and complete darkness. All the details here feel carefully connected, but its living inhabitants do not.

**It feels like a forewarning of a time when AI machines will eventually examine human remains.**

The solitary creatures in Huyghe's work prompt reflection on the responsibility of having a sentient body, of dealing with our unpredictable and instinctual minds. The nine connected rooms, organized over two floors, are either very sparsely lit or pitch black. Although when I visited, the show was busy, with a long queue out the front door, inside the space was hushed, as bodies shuffled around, occasionally colliding, much like the cave fish.



Pierre Huyghe, *Untitled (Human Mask)*, 2014, film still, Pinault Collection.

Courtesy: © Pierre Huyghe, by SIAE 2023; Hauser & Wirth, London; Anna Lena Films, Paris; photograph: Ola Rindal

A similarly sleek and unblemished mask to the one in *Zoodram 6* appears in the film *Human Mask* (2014), another slow and lonely affair. It is worn by a figure resembling a little girl, with hairy simian limbs and long black hair, who potters around an apartment in the Japanese city of Fukushima – the site of a nuclear disaster in 2011. Why would a small child, if it is a small child, be alone at home? Or why would a monkey, if it is a monkey, be in a home at all? The noise of the fridge door opening and closing is about as loud as it gets in this abode. I'm reminded of being alone in my own flat, when minor noises become amplified by my heightened awareness of the surrounding silence.

Sound is an essential consideration on this journey into the abyss. I could hear the light babble of running water playing in the two rooms containing the tanks, a clever detail without an obvious source. It's an ambient noise that speaks to the slow trickle of time; meanwhile, the fish continue to circle, and the hermit crab struggles. A high-pitched, foreboding frequency resounded in the central atrium, a concrete cell containing *Camata* (2024), a new film in which robotic camera apparatus surveys the bones of a human skeleton in a desert landscape, its lens driven by machine-learning. It feels like a forewarning of a time when AI machines will eventually examine human remains as we currently do with dinosaur bones.

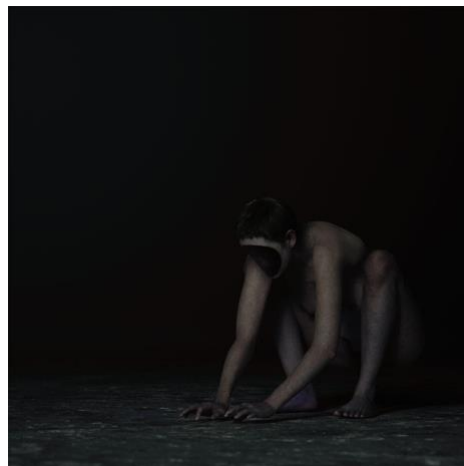


Pierre Huyghe, *Camata*, 2024, film still. Courtesy: © Pierre Huyghe, by SIAE 2023; Galerie Chantal Crousel; Marian Goodman Gallery; Hauser & Wirth; Esther Schipper and TARO NASU; photograph: Ola Rindal

A towering LED screen bisecting a long hall displays a real-world simulation, the titular *Liminal* (2024), in which a computer-generated figure, whose face seems to have been scooped out like the stone of an avocado, moves through a lunar landscape, contemplating her own hands in her lap or crawling on the floor. The ground is covered in black gravel on which sits *Estelarium* (2024), a low monolith of basalt rock with an indent in its top surface that matches the crater in the protagonist's cranium. This motif of impact is visually picked up later in another work, *Cambrian Explosion 19* (2013), a meteorite-like rock, part submerged in water, on which little ancient lifeforms subsist, including horseshoe crabs.

**The show feels more observational than persuasive or moral, which is its success.**

Huyghe's role as an artist is as catalyst, initiating an action that AI or robotics then orchestrates and develops autonomously, effectively co-authoring the work. Upstairs, in *Offspring* (2018), for instance, two metal boxes containing directional blue, red and white stage lights 'perform' against a misty sea synchronized with Erik Satie's piano compositions *Gymnopédies 1* and *3* (1888) – an AI programme generates the light, smoke and sound at random to create a unique experience with each cycle. All this self-sufficient machinery and lost humanity might sound anxiety-inducing, but I find it oddly calm and comforting. Indeed, the show feels more observational than persuasive or moral, which is its success.



Pierre Huyghe, *Liminal*, 2024-ongoing, film still. Courtesy: © Pierre Huyghe, by SIAE 2023; Galerie Chantal Crousel; Marian Goodman Gallery; Hauser & Wirth; Esther Schipper and TARO NASU; photograph: Ola Rindal

The exhibition literature details how Huyghe considers his works to be ‘speculative fiction’ – a term I sometimes find hard to grapple within the context of art because its open license provides little tension. However, the installations and films on display here are so sophisticated, self-contained and autonomous in their realization that academic language would seem incongruous.

Situated in a naturally lit space towards the tip of the building is a series of ballpen drawings depicting singular, energy-emitting figures by Anthony Nosiku Ikwueme (‘Fire from Eyes’, 2014). Ikwueme is one of two artists, the other being Bruce Nauman, who were invited to show their work alongside Huyghe’s. It’s a curatorial choice that creates a resonance of sensibilities between the artist, his conceptual forebear (Nauman) and his descendant (Ikwueme), with all three interested in the complex spectrum of human cognition. Nauman’s contribution, *3 Heads Fountain (3 Andrews)* (2005), is a clash of three resin skulls suspended above a shallow pool: water travels upwards through coils of plastic piping and shoots in every direction from pinholes in the scarred surfaces of the scalp and face. Both Ikwueme’s and Nauman’s contributions are majestic in their simplicity.



Pierre Huyghe, *Offspring*, 2018, *Idiom*, 2024, installation view, ‘Pierre Huyghe. Liminal’, 2024, Punta della Dogana, Venezia.  
 Courtesy: the artist; Pinault Collection; Leeum Museum of Art; Palazzo Grassi; photograph: Ola Rindal

Of all the shows I saw in Venice during this year’s biennial, ‘Liminal’ was the only one that wholly transported me elsewhere, inside an artist’s complete vision. Huyghe and Stenne have created a space that feels like a fish tank, full of strange autonomous interventions that mostly go about their business independently, supposedly harvesting information from their surroundings via sensors, interpreting it through AI and integrating it into their operations. The material lists of Huyghe’s installations indicate a reactive component through descriptions such as ‘real-time recording and emitting’. However, this technology’s exact placement and direct consequence remain opaque to the lay viewer – is its very existence a work of fiction, too?

Post-humanism in sculptural or filmic form is challenging to pull off without seeming underwhelming or dated. This expensively produced show is neither. Throughout ‘Liminal’, I am highly aware of my body’s presence in space, whether it’s the sound of my feet crunching on the gravel or an increased sensitivity to nearby frequencies. If art doesn’t serve to elevate our most fundamental consciousness, what is its role? Meanwhile, the fish continue to circle, the crab to struggle.

*Pierre Huyghe’s ‘Liminal’ is on view at Punta della Dogana, Venice, until 24 November*