

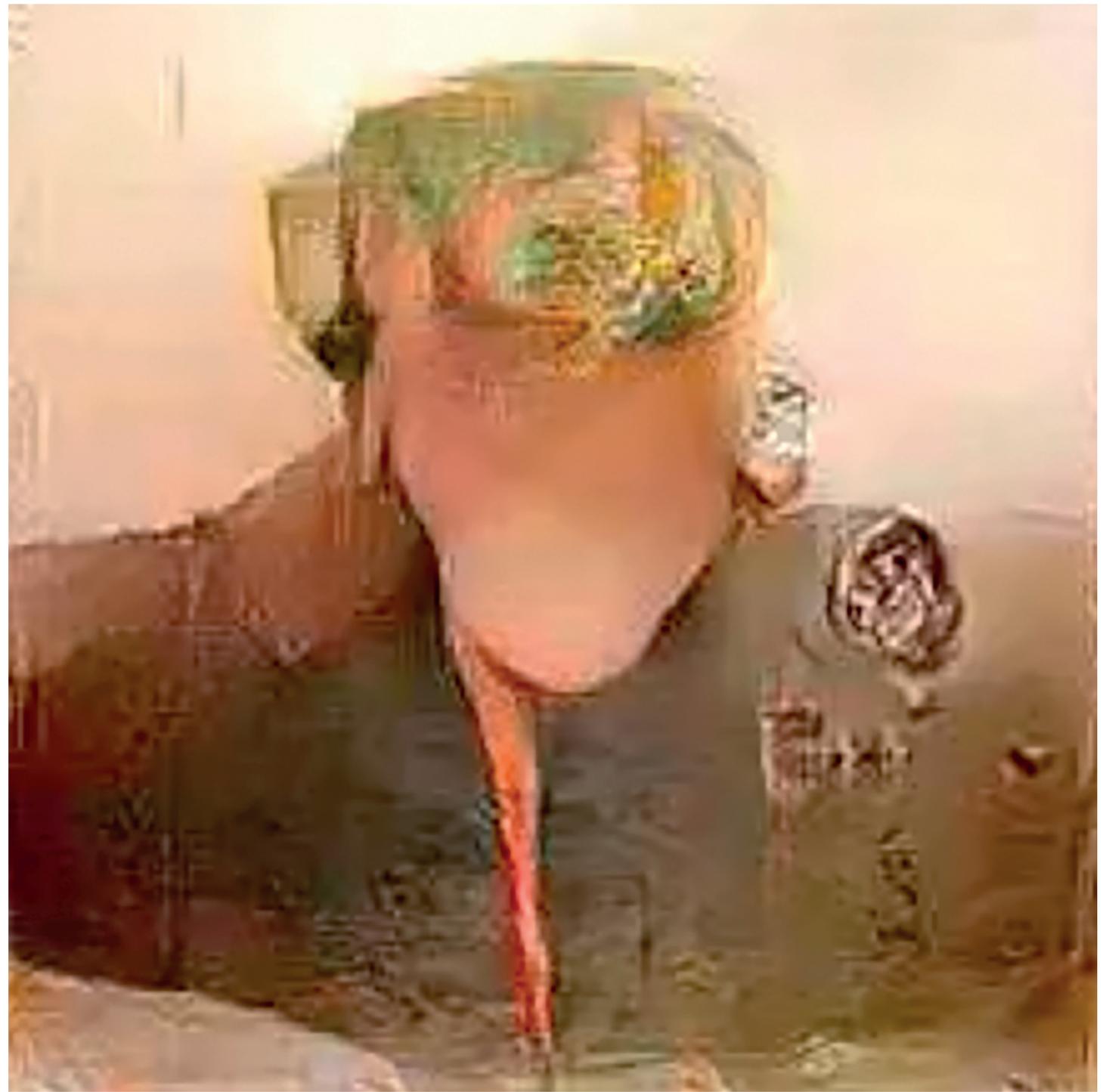
art

**PIERRE
HUYGHE**

reimagining the exhibition as a living ecosystem, french art star pierre huyghe simulates a world in which art objects, technology, and organisms interconnect to generate a new post-human aesthetic.

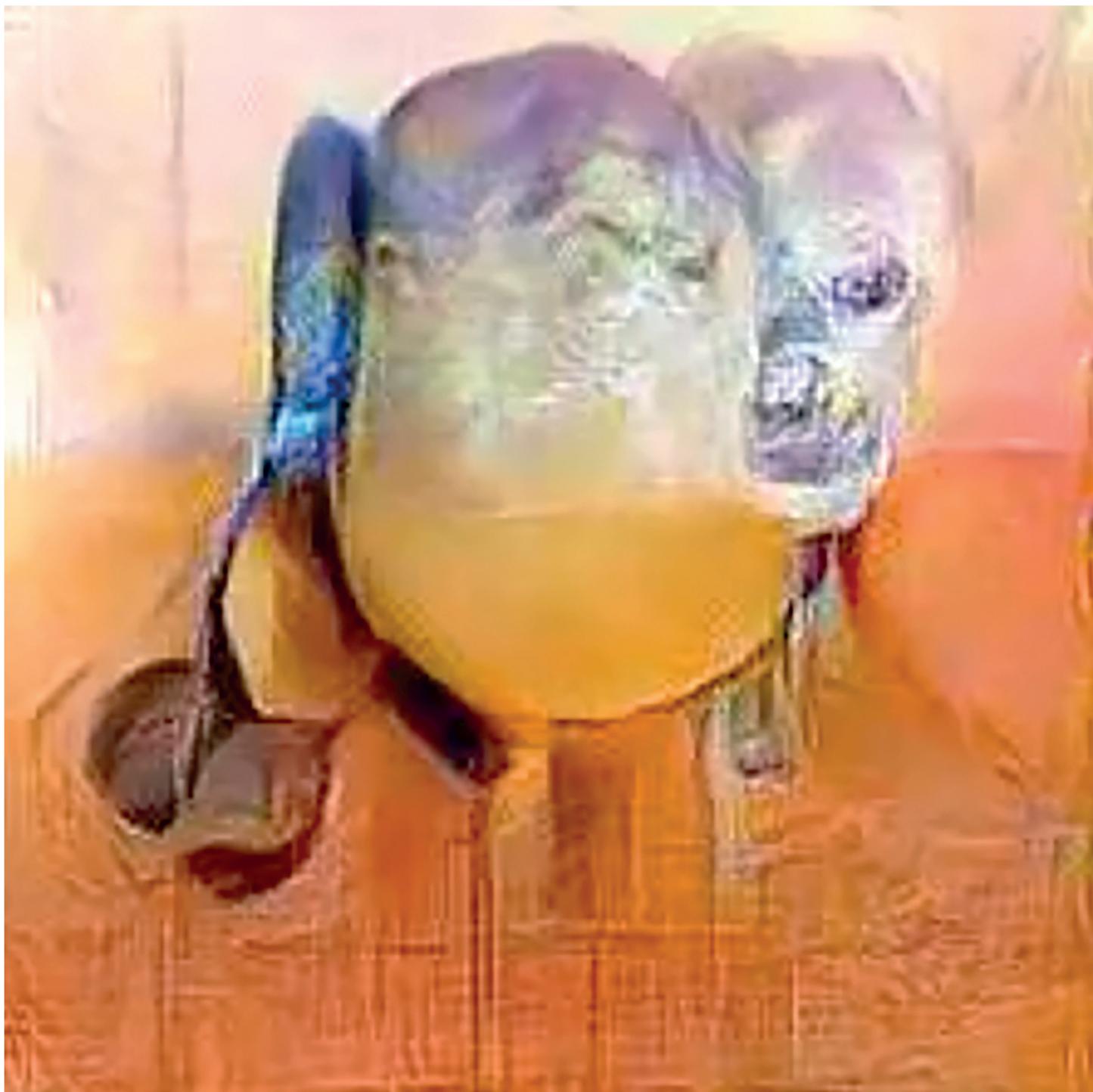
*by JÉRÔME SANS and
OLIVIER ZAHM*

HUYGHE



PIERRE HUYGHE, *Umwelt*, 2018-ONGOING,
DEEP IMAGE RECONSTRUCTIONS

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PIERRE HUYGHE, *UUMWELT*, 2018-ONGOING,
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PURPLE – What are some of your earliest memories linked to the future?
PIERRE HUYGHE – Going to visit a 707 flight simulator with my father, who was a pilot; the space colonies; the “No Future” narratives – although somehow they were all fossil-energy-related, and some were deceptive; as well as science-fiction movies and literature.

PURPLE – Is there a past or future exhibition of yours that speaks directly about the future? Or is it a transversal preoccupation?
PIERRE HUYGHE – Not really, as I’m not into anticipation or futurology, telling in advance what will be. Instead, I’m driven more by speculative thought – what could be or could have been different, and how these possibilities could infiltrate reality.

PURPLE – For you, is the future just another fiction? A simulation? A technological lie? Or, on the contrary, is it a “true” transformative perspective that we need at the collective level?
PIERRE HUYGHE – Yes, it’s a fiction, but if we see fictions as vehicles to access possibilities, other possible worlds, and if [they are] understood as counterfactual or imagination unbound from the known, it is worth believing in them, as they enable these worlds. The future is just an optional landing for possibilities, not a given.

Somehow, we are already in a simulation, right? We have always put something above us. Maybe the lie you mention is the illusion that there is no escape from prediction, the open-ended and infinite possibilities of the simulation, as if there were no aberrations. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard called them “unease, noise,” outside of language, undetectable, incorrect, weak, corrupt, ambiguous, weird. I’m thinking of how the American artist Ian Cheng used narration as a way of resisting open-ended simulation, addressing human cognition and the polyphony of artificial selves. There is also the French architect François Roche, who, within fictional scenarios, uses real human pathologies to

introduce vulnerability as disrupting factors during the completion of his work, in order to bypass the “all predictive” unfolding of the computation. As to what’s left for humans in the face of contingency, of the “all possible,” the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé used the game of fiction. For Mallarmé, what remains is a game of thought and language, a near-nothing artifice, yet not nothingness.

About finding a real transformative perspective at a collective level, it would probably start with fiction, by locating possibilities, a new home unconstrained by the here and now, open to speculation on historical “other roads” as yet untaken, and probably by distinguishing the lowest common denominator in that collective.

PURPLE – What is this recurring obsession with time in your work? And how has it evolved?

PIERRE HUYGHE – Perhaps it’s a question of habit, or the fear of freezing and ending something. I need to feel the plasticity of things and thoughts in action, to see their metamorphosis, and there is doubt that monuments last.

I started with time-based works and exhibitions: time scores, programs for basic automata, choreography, a mise-en-scène of events, durations; rhythmic that change things, that appear and disappear. But they were too predictable even if noncyclical, and lacking uncertainty, contingency, but for whom? If it was only addressed to a human subject, an exhibition-goer, the quality of that time was hysterical. What needed to change was the subject/object relation, and, with it, the time and space protocols under which their encounter occurred, so that they affect each other. One thing was to bring different life-forms or particular intelligences into play: a multiplicity of collaborators, a polyphony of voices, inhuman, alien – or a living medium that was unpredictable or that could learn by itself, so that different temporalities could emerge and transform the exhibition, some of which go beyond human ability to experience them.

PURPLE – Your exhibitions “Umwelt” (2018) at the Serpentine Gallery and “After Umwelt” at the LUMA Foundation in Arles (2021) borrow their titles from Jakob von Uexküll’s concept of the “environment-world.” You address the porosity and collaboration between humans, the living, and technology. In your work, humans as well as technologies and natural entities form hybrid “milieus.” How do you define these hybrid milieus in your exhibitions?
PIERRE HUYGHE – I do not see the exhibition as a space with objects in it, but as an entity, an environmental creature in which time and space are constituents. It’s this condition of appearance that interested me. To define it as a “milieu” is not ideal, but it’s the best word I have come up with, for now. A milieu is an *umwelt*, an environment in the broader sense of the word, a necessary interdependence that exists between what constitutes it.

A milieu is not a hybrid of different elements. There is a porosity between humans, animals, and technology, as humans are animal, and all animals have technology. It leaks and has leaks – and we now know that we are haunted by everything, as we haunt everything.

The milieu is a hybrid in the sense that it is modified by distinct agents that constitute it, pass through it, and change the configuration by way of their entanglement, the narrative, the ways they exist together, their sympoiesis. The milieu is always transitioning to another configuration of itself, in metamorphosis. As a hybrid, it remains in the in-between state, like a spectre or ghost. The existence of the milieu is not enclosed but disembodied, not situated as the added “U” in “Umwelt” suggests, which is like “no” or at least less determinate.

By hybrid, spectral milieu, I mean categorical confusion, *umwelts* that shift or remain unsolved, an enigma. The entity is neither an object nor a biological organism; it captures data, or it senses differently. It is sentient, has emotions, gets sad, which

doesn't necessarily imply it is biological or alive. After reading *Life's Edge* by Carl Zimmer, the definition of what life is vanishes. And finally, it generates an excess of itself.

To change the exhibition ritual, which is often an asymmetrical experience, and to move away from the historical Western model that revolves around the subject/object mode of encounter, there are probably other alternatives. One of these could be that, rather than exhibiting something to someone, you could expose someone to something. For a few years now, I have put someone in the presence of an alterity. The alterity is indifferent to someone's presence, not always disponible for an encounter, but being modified by it. This alterity perceives, has a certain form of agency, a particular intelligence or way to experience the world, and it is not dependent on someone's gaze to exist.

On the other side, if the someone, the subject, is no longer the center of attention to be addressed, but one among others in an exchange, it might require more attention on their part. They become a raw witness. So, the exhibition ritual changes – if there are at least two types of intelligences meeting, two sensible experiences, someone and a being-milieu, it doesn't imply that it goes well; the two are in constant negotiation, and there is resistance. Along with this, some decisions in the production of an exhibition are not in my hands but involve others, so I release control over the actualization.

To talk about "UUmwelt": it is a coproduction of imagination between human and machine. Someone is imagining something; the brain activity of this person is captured, and an adversarial neural network, a GAN [Generative Adversarial Network], reconstructed these mental images. What we see is a process (the GAN is guessing what the mental images are). The result is moving images, a flow of hesitations and rejections. It resembles something we know but cannot define; they are chimeras. I see these images as a language of a "mind-to-mind" communication, a language that is somehow ineffable.

In "After UUmwelt," what someone has imagined, the mental images, are now exposed to a sensible milieu and modified by what is there: life-forms and climatic conditions, among other things. The images transit as data and find different mediums of existence. The images appear on screens or manifest physically as aggregates of synthetic and biological matter. To add to the human spectral presence already at play, a face-recognition device captures each visitor's face, and a neural network generates new images from these captures. This new excess of images appears on the screens like cancer cells in an incubator that have reached a certain threshold of division. It is a long description...

PURPLE – Do you think that the permeability between the virtual world and the organic world, between technology and humanity, will continue to intensify? In what forms?

PIERRE HUYGHE – Humanity and technology co-emerge; their permeability never stops increasing. Together, they are mirrors, self-domestications, feedback loops. Permeability to a point of undifferentiation could lead to entropy, a singularity. New bifurcations or distinctions will arrive, other types of relationships: of mythology, of symbiosis with technology or an algorithmic environment. It's the polycosmotronics mentioned by Yuk Hui. Someone like Ali Brivanlou, a brilliant molecular embryologist and friend, could tell you about biological machines, human feathers, artificial brains, organoid wombs, what genetics is opening, other types of senses, sentient and emotional bio-machines that imagine and give birth. It is easy to imagine that there are other types of bodies, minds, and selfhoods, viral or spectral, other ways of being and knowing that might emerge. A new, human-made Cambrian explosion!

PURPLE – Will you continue to combine forms of animal intelligence with artificial and human intelligence in your exhibitions?

PIERRE HUYGHE – Right now, I'm working on a permanent project on an island in



Norway. Again, it's an entity, a milieu, both physical and digital, modified by what it perceives. It is, at the same time, an actual island and what this island could be under an alternate reality. We have scanned the whole site and turned it into a simulated environment, where algorithmic and biological agents encounter each other. We are writing a new set of rules that are not bound to physical reality. They are played out by learning machines and intelligent systems that generate mutations, whose behaviors change in real time according to external factors. The mutations transform over the years, and once in a while, they randomly exit the simulation to manifest physically on the actual island. There they decompose and contaminate the existing reality by another possibility of itself.

PURPLE – This concept of interspecies hybridization is very present in your work, where processes of anthropomorphization are played out, as in *Human* (2013) or *Human Mask* (2014), a film

PORTRAIT BY GIASCO BERTOLI

in which we follow a masked monkey wandering around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear exclusion zone. Can you describe what this animal/girl/child represents in a world freed from humans, as much as it is destroyed? PIERRE HUYGHE – Yes, to name a dog "Human" or to give a monkey a human mask is to be literal in giving human attributes. Humans have no face and wear the mask of "being human" before covering everything with more masks that bear many names: time, nature, us, reason, etc.

The film takes place just after the catastrophic event, in a moment of suspension, free from humans but not from anthropomorphism. Within this disruptive situation appears a monkey wearing a human mask. The mask is a representation that bridges Nô theater and cyborg. The monkey follows the routine it learned to do while being a servant in an abandoned restaurant. At times, we see it pausing, as though stuck between instructions: being an automaton and its instinctual behaviors. It is a residual image of human presence carried by an unconscious and sole mediator – the spectre we were talking about earlier.

As a viewer, it's difficult to abstract the mask from the monkey's behaviors and gestures. Even without expressivity, we project human emotions on the chimera of animal, child, girl. The "being human" mask that we all have in our minds is a safe way to capture otherness, and the film is trying to confuse that behavior.

PURPLE – In the face of the ecological, economic, and scientific upheavals of our time, do you feel that the future will be better or worse than the times we live in now? Is it possible to form a positive (not dystopian or apocalyptic) image or scenario?

PIERRE HUYGHE – It depends on how far in the future we're talking about – thousands or billions of years? I find something suspicious in the green, positivist, self-sustaining castle of the Solarpunk ideas – something sounds like Aldous Huxley. "The" human idealization, the genre of being human, should transform

and accept its incompleteness, mainly through radical fictions we agree to believe in, and probably also by looking at the history of otherness. I'm more interested, retrospectively, in tomorrows that might never arrive or pasts unknown or untaken. But to eliminate what is to come, as a possibility, and encapsulate minds and desires in an eternal nowness is claustrophobic.

PURPLE – Who, for you, is the great author/thinker for the future?

PIERRE HUYGHE – Difficult to say or choose one. I'm currently reading these authors – Tristan Garcia, Yuk Hui, Reza Negarestani, Ted Chiang, Tobias Rees, Patricia Reed, and Federico Campagna, among others – and find them stimulating.

END



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