

Pierre Huyghe: “Umwelt,” the space between humanity

A torso with six eyes like robin’s egg shells is buffeted by a virtual breeze across a grainy, barren landscape. A rose-colored bulb props up a wrinkled yellow membrane flanked on each side by what must either be the wings of a fly, or maybe a bubble. A faceless canine stands sentinel to a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Each of these images derives from the other, morphing over the course of a thirty second viewing period. Far from anything mind-altering, these images represent a byproduct of a person’s most unadulterated thoughts, passed through a digital filter and presented in the form of artist Pierre Huyghe’s newest exhibition, “Umwelt,” on view at the Serpentine Galleries in London until February 10th, 2019.

The bulk of the experience delivered by the exhibition comes in the form of four to five LCD screens scattered around the galleries. Each room contains one or two screens, a dusting of sand on the floor, and a population of live flies. Upon entering the first gallery, there is a growing sense of unease as the flies either hover just far enough out of reach to avoid distracting or litter the floor of the exhibition, having been squashed by unaware gallery-goers. Perhaps the reason for the visitor’s absentminded steps are the fascinating and dynamic images that ground Mr. Huyghe’s installation. A series of images, not quite human, maintain an oddly organic and tangible air as they dance across the ceiling-to-floor panels.

The exhibition description describes these as “mental images.” In fact, they are the result of Mr. Huyghe’s collaboration with Dr. Yukiyasu Kamitani, whose lab at Kyoto University produced the exhibition’s images based on MRI data. After collecting data from human participants who were asked to think of an image or look at a picture, the lab’s Artificial Intelligence interpreted that data into the grainy, illusory visions on view at the Serpentine. The sequence of the images is constantly varied, with each screen displaying a different set of images. As a consequence of this variation, subsequent visits to the gallery deliver a different experience every time. The content of any individual image is impossible to discern, simply because the images are played at a rate which gives the illusion of an onscreen transformation.

This metamorphosis produces shapes and textures that resemble a sort of membrane, a bird, a brain, or any number of real-world motifs with a generous dash of surreal coloration and

figurative contortion. The images resist becoming a photo montage of disparate and overwhelming parts. There is a formal adherence that remains in each image for a few moments before a more radical, dream-like bending of space and texture occurs. In this way, each screen remains compelling. The exhibition's impact would have been significantly weaker if the visual elements of the installation were hollow and unengaging upon extended viewing. It is precisely because the images draw viewers in and seem to demand sustained attention that Huyghe's curated thoughts prove worthwhile. Viewers are lured in by their own curiosity. When visitors come in a group, many feel prompted to discuss their observations and interpretations of the spectacle, insisting that the space they are pointing to *must* be the head of a duck, or a foot, or a bubble. The conceptual elements of the exhibition are central to its impact, however it is the continuous engagement visitors have with the work that mark the exhibition's success.

On paper, the sand and flies complement the mystique of the images, adding a tangible, organic element to the tantalizing, dream-like images. If the gallery contained only the screens, there would be no reason to relate the visual matter to the outside world; the images would live exclusively in the hermetically-sealed vacuum of the gallery.

While Huyghe seeks to create a comprehensive experience for the spectator, a lack of ambition in scale and execution causes the exhibition's environmental elements to fall relatively flat. The presence of the sand and the flies is perhaps a subconscious suggestion for the viewer to look for some sort of organic, living element in the image sequences, though in my own visit to the exhibition, I was disappointed to find that the flies' presence in the gallery felt relatively sparse. Although the flies I encountered certainly provoked unease and a greater awareness of my position in the gallery space, there were ultimately too few of them to really pique anything more than an occasional curiosity.

The sand was similarly underwhelming, though its streaks across the floor nicely juxtapose the lighter coatings, drawing attention to the entropy of the space and the impact of human movement. Huyghe and the Serpentine created the sand by removing the gallery walls themselves: by scraping away layers and layers of wall and paint, Huyghe has literally carved negative space into the gallery, taking away from the wall at the same time as he redistributes the

sandy residue throughout the gallery. While Huyghe's ambition certainly seemed promising, however, his execution leaves much to be desired. Only the central room of the gallery has a truly significant portion of the wall removed, with the sand amounting to little more than a dusting. In this way, both of the supplementary components of the exhibition, while conceptually rich, fail to elicit the same impact as the screens. These details do not diminish the wonder of the mental images; however, an artist like Huyghe, who has been known to create engrossing and fully encompassing installations such as the 2017 "Skulpture Projekt" in Münster, Germany, is capable of more. In some areas of "Umwelt," it feels as though Huyghe treads too lightly, so as not to distract from the revelations offered by the screen-based portion of the show.

"Umwelt" is stimulating and dynamic, featuring images which marry the most current veins of fine art and computer science. By simultaneously negating and affirming human vision, Huyghe creates a new space outside both the human mind and the algorithm. With the addition of other multisensory elements, he attempts to go one step further, shaving off the walls of the gallery and adding insects to create an immersive environment. While these components are conceptually strong, however, their execution is lackluster for an artist with Huyghe's pedigree. Of his 2017 "Skulpture Projekt," Huyghe said: "The museum is a place of separation, in a certain way, and I need a place of continuity."¹ The title of this most recent exhibition, "Umwelt," takes its name from German word for "environment." It is interesting, then, that Huyghe's greatest feat here is not found in the immersive installation, but rather in the onscreen lives of fluid images—in the space that exists between our thoughts and their grainy, otherworldly counterparts.

NOTES

1. Russeth, Andrew. "Constant Displacement: Pierre Huyghe on His Work at Skulptur Projekte Münster -." ARTnews. June 26, 2017. Accessed January 22, 2019. <http://www.artnews.com/2017/06/26/constant-displacement-pierre-huyghe-on-his-work-at-skulptur-projekte-munster-2017/>