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**SENSE
TECHNICS
BODY**

MIKA ELO & MIIKA LUOTO eds.

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Pressings

HARRI LAAKSO

In art, things often are out of place and sometimes not what they seem. Art creates worlds from this out-of-placeness and this seeming. But how does artistic research thrive in such created spaces? What forces act on artistic agency, matter and knowledge, what pressures are exerted on language, what imaginary and tropological figures emerge?

This essay takes as its departure points Pierre Huyghe's two site-specific works *Untilled* (2012) and *Roof Garden Commission* (2015) and Maurice Blanchot's texts, especially his novella *The One Who Was Standing Apart From Me* (1953). These works are here not so much as illustrations or examples of artistic research as they are reflective surfaces for another thought and a way of pacing. I do not want to "solve", interpret or analyse them, frankly not even to understand them. Their coexistence here is partly coincidental and intuitive. I encountered them and they touched me at an op-

portune time, and act here as reference points for – and in place of – something else.¹

I'm also writing myself away from these works. I'm writing *about* them, *alongside* them and in a final manoeuvre losing touch with them, trying to find solace in a position *apart from them* and from my writing self. I notice that I might be suggesting, in effect, that artistic research is riddled with an innate inability to touch.

AREA

Untilled (2012) was the name of the artwork, or *place*, which Pierre Huyghe had built on the composting area of Kassel's Karlsaue Park. There on the small clearing in the woods one would confront a number of things, including piles of sand, dirt, asphalt, concrete tiles, anthills, an uprooted oak (which was originally planted for Joseph Beuys's project in 1982²), psychotropic plants and a female statue, whose head was obscured by an active beehive. In addition a man walked a dog around the site (with puppies, I am told, although I did not see any) like an automaton, day after day. The artwork was part of the dOCUMENTA (13) exhibition (work number 83 in the exhibition) and it placed the different elements at the forest clearing – the living, non-living and dead things alike, their interrelations, tensions and stings – onto the landscape of contemporary art. As such that was not unusual, as it has become more than customary that the borders between artistic meaning making and “the world

1 Parts of this text were published earlier in Finnish as “Pistoja” in Kosketuksen figureja, ed. Mika Elo, Helsinki, Tutkijaliitto. Other sections of this text were part of a performative “In absentia -lecture”, written by me and presented by Crystal Bennes at the *KuvA Research Days* 2016, University of the Arts Helsinki, on 9th December 2015.

2 The oaks were part of Joseph Beuys's project, which started in 1982 and which included planting 7000 trees in Kassel.

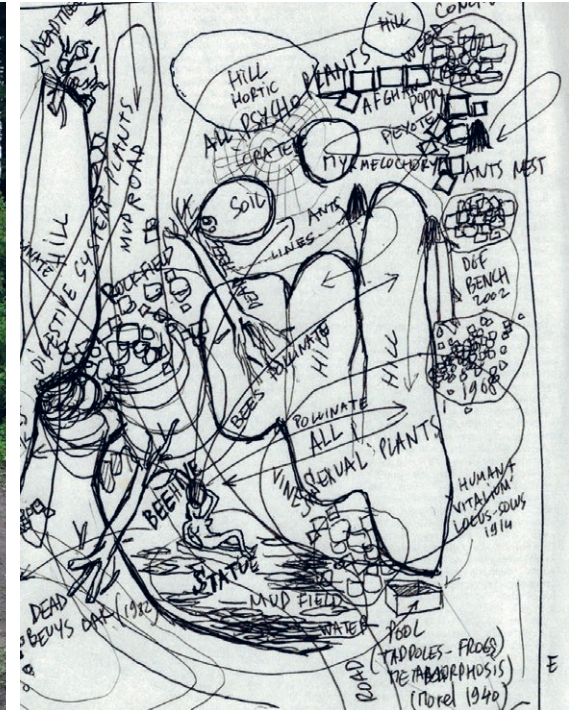
at large” are obscured, and that the artworks test their own limits and those of our world.

The name of Huyghe's work was *Untilled*, which many visitors quickly read as “Untitled” – a slip which undoubtedly speaks of the *parergonal* forces of expectation in our confrontation with the art world. The word refers to land, which is not prepared and cultivated for crops, a sort of wasteland, land that is not tilled. As such “Untilled” echoes the possibility of some anonymous reserve that is in waiting and still only remotely attached to culture and language. The park itself is “human nature” and the compost area within it a shrine of decay, somewhere at the border of life and death, or order and the formless, an incessant trade of entropy and negentropy. Things disintegrate, reassemble, are taken apart and find new places as building blocks of cells, or in the work of our thoughts. “The set of operations that occurs between [the different elements] has no script. There are antagonisms, associations, hospitality and hostility, corruption, separation and degeneration or collapse with no encounters.”³ What becomes met is a condition with all the vibrant rhythms and metamorphoses, something like a system in all its instability, without a script and with no choreography.

In the short catalogue text Huyghe describes the work as follows: “The place is enclosed. Elements and spaces from different times in history lie next to each other with no chronological order or sign of origin. What is present are either physical adaptations of fictional and factual documents or existing things. In the compost of the Karlsaue park, artifacts, inanimate elements, and living organisms... plants, animals, humans, bacteria are left *without culture*.”⁴

3 Pierre Huyghe, *dOCUMENTA. Das Begleitbuch/The Guidebook*. Katalog 3/3, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2012, 262.

4 Ibid. Italics mine.



I'm letting this area composed by Huyghe, simultaneously active and dormant, where mental images (figures and figments of imagination)⁵ and materials touch each other; also be the fertile ground and metaphor for discussing two central issues of artistic research, namely agency and materiality, and the connection between them. These concepts are central because artistic research explores, before anything else, how artworks, presentations and images *themselves* perform research gestures, separate from any intentions of their maker.⁶ And because the status of an artwork as agency is still unclear, also the aims of artistic research often become obscured: Does artistic research open a pathway to another kind of knowledge after all or instead to the *other of knowledge*? Perhaps artistic research literally *does not know*?

Maybe artistic research should not be viewed in relation to, say the natural sciences or humanities, but as *imaginary activity* – not because it does not yet exist, or because it is only always yet to come, permanently *not yet*, but because it is basically the activity and interplay of mental and material images. Different kinds of tensions, research operations and gestures are formed between these two dimensions. They do not as such become the objects of research, but attest to things that happen (i.e. which are events), thereby opening new avenues for agency – where agency becomes defined as a capability or a force (pressure) that acts on an existing situation. This loads the material and the artefacts that make up artworks with new potency, while at the same time inviting one to reassess the nature of artistic agency and to approach theoretical thinking itself also as a material operation.

5 “Figment” and “figure” have the same etymology. Latin *figura* ‘shape, figure, form’; related to *ingere* ‘to form, to contrive’.

6 In Finnish artistic research is sometimes – in my view misleadingly – called “teki-jälähtöinen tutkimus” (“author-based research”) that would imply something opposite to what I’m proposing here.

DECLARATION

Artistic research “in general” does not exist. Any act of artistic research necessarily includes some sort of explicit or implicit declaration of one’s stance on art – on its function, place and nature *for that individual researcher*. Sometimes, most often I imagine, this will go unnoticed, either because it is taken for granted that there exists a general consensus on what we mean by art, or for precisely the opposite reason: because there can never exist any consensus or adequate definition the whole enterprise can seem futile. For my own purposes, however, I find this most necessary and also pedagogically sound and even prefer to call it an active ‘declaration’ – rather like one declares that one holds certain cards in a card game. This is because what follows is wholly dependent on this declaration.

If, in the beginning, I mentioned that *artistic research does not know*, it is because, *for me*, any art that I am curious or passionate about *does not know*, does not exhibit those ideals that we place for knowledge, of an organized, stable, and coherent economy of meaning. Saying this I am fully aware of the non-conceptually based or embodied ‘forms’ of knowledge or skill, and do not doubt their existence or value, only their pertinence in this case. *For me* art is about something else.

I take my lead from the French thinker Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003). In his view an artwork is not an “accomplishment” or a production as such, a work of bringing to light, but has an imaginary centre that opens in what he calls “unworking” (*désœuvrement*), somewhere beyond being grasped by knowledge and naming.

For Blanchot literary language was not about communicating and interpreting messages, but is about being suspended in this annihilating disappearance of language, at a distance from things. For a true language to begin it is necessary for this nothingness to

have been felt, to endure the double absence of the thing and of the idea. Literature does not seek to name things, to grasp them by the use of language, but desires them prior to that naming.

”For the work is the very decision which dismisses him [the writer], cuts him off, makes of him a survivor, without work. He becomes the inert idler upon whom art does not depend.”⁷ The writer belongs to what precedes the work, to its indecisiveness, as Blanchot writes, ”to the shadow of events, not their reality, to the image, not the object, to what allows words themselves to become images, appearances – not signs, values, the power of truth”.⁸

At the same time the work remains ”illegible, a secret”.⁹ This is also the task for artistic research, to keep grasping towards what cannot be grasped, to encounter the *unknown as unknown*, where the unknown will not be revealed, but indicated.

This is the only possible relation to the work, not a proper relation at all.

APARTMENT

The feeling of being out of place or being apart can begin close to our very body at any unsuspecting instant. It can be accompanied by the feeling of something existing – human or not, alive or not – somewhere imminently close to us, and making an appearance only at a select moment.

The suggestion (or allusion?) here is not only that artworks too sometimes create the space and conditions for the appearance of such new voices, operating in close proximity, but that the investigation of those elusive voices and of how they could be approached

7 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982 [1955], 24.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 23.

is a question for artistic research – if one is determined to open up the eroded space, the world where the event of the artwork takes place and listens to its own voice. This search takes us to a place where the work points to a figure radically outside and preceding itself, to its own precondition, towards the direction Michel Foucault saw Samuel Beckett leading us with his sentence: “What matter who’s speaking, someone said, what matter who’s speaking.”¹⁰

To tackle this task and to try to elucidate some suggestions concerning agency and implication, I will take recourse to Maurice Blanchot’s novella *The One Who Was Standing Apart From Me* from 1953. To call it a ‘novella’ is perhaps already a misapprehension because this feat of writing resists literary classification as much as it resists interpreting what actually happens in the text, what are the events that occur. The novella, then, is a first person narrative of someone in an apartment doing very little, except thinking: he’s sitting at a desk, looking out the window, becoming thirsty and getting a glass of water, and writing (possibly writing, because the unresolved question “is someone writing at this very moment” becomes the most disturbing question of them all). The narrator sees a figure outside the window, or in the house, and converses and negotiates with someone, is encouraged by someone (or perhaps that someone is himself). Yet it is ultimately debatable whether any of the seemingly trivial actions happen at all. Everything is veiled in a cloud of uncertainty, and it seems that the more trivial the task (like getting a glass of water) the more impotent the narrator becomes in completing it.

10 Michel Foucault quoting Beckett in “What is An Author?” [1969], trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Itacha, Cornell University Press, 1977, 115. The quote is from Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, trans. Beckett. London: Carder & Boyars, 1974, 16.

One can think of the text having an almost physical presence. In fact the translator of Blanchot, Lydia Davis, has written of her experience in the following way:

“The experience of translating the essays was one of the most difficult I ever had, in translating. As though the experience were in fact, a piece of fiction by Blanchot, the meaning of a difficult phrase or sentence would often become a physical entity that eluded me, my brain becoming both the pursuer and the arena in which the pursuit took place. Understanding became an intensely physical act.”¹¹

Moreover, Blanchot’s text seems to resist not only interpretation but summary as well. Even if one is able to follow the argument from word to word and from sentence to sentence, it seems not to amount to a comprehensible whole. A short (but unsatisfactory) summary of the narrative, Davis writes, could be: “In a house in the southern part of some country, a man goes from room to room being asked the question ‘Are you writing now?’ by another character who may or may not exist.” In her view Blanchot’s novella’s difficulty rests in the way in which “paradox, and impossibility, are incorporated as perfectly natural elements of the action”, and in how it hinders any attempt to identify the actors and types of action (concrete or possible), and to separate out concrete actors from abstract ones, and from permutations of both.¹²

An excerpt from Blanchot’s actual text might illuminate the nature of these actions:

“A little later, I found myself back on the bed. Nothing was different: I still saw the table, it extended from one window to the oth-

11 <http://yaleunion.org/lydia-davis/> (Accessed 2.2.2017).

12 Lydia Davis describes these combinations at length. There are, for example, such concrete actors as the narrator, but also abstract ones, like the figure who is possibly invented by the narrator. Sometimes abstract qualities like desire or immobility perform as actors. And sometimes the actions are only possible (“I think I moved”), etc.

er, from west to east, as far as I could tell. What struck me, what I tried to bring out of my musings, was why, in this little room, the impression of life was so strong, a radiant life, not of another age, but of the present moment, and mine – I knew it with a clear, joyful knowledge – and yet that clarity was extraordinarily empty, that summer light gave the greatest feeling of distress and coldness. This is open space, I said to myself, the vast country: here I work. The idea that I lived here – that I worked here – meant, it is true, that at this moment I was only here as an image, the reflection of a solitary instant sliding through the immobility of time. A cold thought I could not break down, that pushed me back, threw me back against the wall, just as “here” changed into “far from here,” but that distance immediately became the radiance of the day, the soaring and the happiness of all of space burning, consuming itself to the transparency of a single point. What a vision! But, alas, only a vision. Yet I felt myself powerfully connected to that instant and in some sense under its domination, because of this my master; in the impression that here a sovereign event was taking place and that to live consisted for me in being eternally here and at the same time in revolving only around here, in an incessant voyage, without discovery, obedient to myself and equal to sovereignty.”¹³

What becomes enacted – I am tempted to say – is the space of writing: the writing I creating the voices and figures who exert their presence, but as image and at a distance. Are they the voices of characters and already those of the readers, echoing through the text? Or does the text spiral towards a mysterious origin of language itself, somewhere beyond its task as transmission of meanings?

13 Maurice Blanchot, *The One Who Was Standing Apart From Me*, in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader. Fiction and Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha, trans. Lydia Davis, Barrytown, Station Hill Press, 1999 [1953], 285.

One more passage from Blanchot:

“To say that I understand these words would not be to explain to myself the dangerous peculiarity of my relations with them. Do I understand them? I do not understand them, properly speaking, and they too who partake of the depth of concealment remain without understanding. But they don’t need that understanding in order to be uttered, they do not speak, they are not interior, they are, on the contrary, without intimacy, being altogether outside, and what they designate engages me in this “outside” of all speech, apparently more secret and more interior than the speech of the innermost heart, but, here, the outside is empty, the secret is without depth, what is repeated is the emptiness of repetition, it doesn’t speak and yet it has always been said already. I couldn’t compare them to an echo, or rather, in this place, the echo repeated in advance: it was prophetic in the absence of time.”¹⁴

Is the secret companion, who is alluded to in the name of the novella and in these fragments, then, not an interlocutor at all but the limit of language itself, as Foucault has asserted? Foucault writes: “That limit, however, is in no way positive; it is instead the deep into which language is forever disappearing only to return identical to itself, the echo of a different discourse that says the same thing, of the same discourse saying something else”.¹⁵ This companion is anonymous, and stays close to the writing I, but at the same time at an immeasurable distance, separated. “That is why he who says I must continually approach him in order finally to meet the companion who does not accompany him and who forms no bond with him that is positive enough to be manifested by being untied.” They are not bound – the I and the companion – but

¹⁴ Ibid., 321–322.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from the Outside”, trans. Brian Massumi in *Foucault / Blanchot*, New York, Zone Books, 1987, 51–52.

linked by the continuous questioning, creating a neutral space for language, a “placeless place that is outside all speech and writing”.¹⁶

The apartment is the space of writing, and the voices are companions and proxies for something hidden, for what language is in its being rather than in its meaning. In another vocabulary we could call this an ecology of writing, because what is described are the relationships evolving between the different ‘organisms’ (the living things) inhabiting the text, their ecosystem.

But I use the word ‘apartment’ here also to reactivate the word’s more ancient etymological sense of “a separated place” (from *ap-partere*), even to propose a neologism: ‘Apartment’ understood as a noun for the *feeling* of being separated from something, similar to ‘detachment’, and yet still remaining also *a part* (of). “*His not being here evoked a sense of apartment*,” one could say. The transformation in meaning from a concrete state of things to this feeling – within the realm of the same word – is the trope that lures me on. For me it is also evocative of the (pre)condition and space of artistic research.

IMAGINARY ACTORS

The artwork seems split to things accessible and things hidden – as does the figure of the author.¹⁷ Who then speaks when we are engaged in artistic research (if it can be said that “we” are engaged in it). What happens when we try to de-activate artist as we know her and try to activate the artwork, paying attention to the full potential of its agencies and hidden parts?

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida writes of “two paintings in painting”. *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1987 [1978], 155–156. Jean-Luc Nancy and Federico Ferrari write of two authors of a work, of which one is inscribed in the work, only encountered there. Federico Ferrari, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Iconographie de l’auteur*, Paris, Gallée, 2005, 2–9. See also Harri Laakso, “Valokuvan työmaa”, *Tiede & Edistys*, 2/06, 161–173.

Let us consider again the work by Pierre Huyghe. I'm drawn to its hidden logic of disarray, and to the insistent feeling that something is happening without my *knowing*, something imaginary.

Looking closely at the sketch provided by Huyghe and printed in the catalogue one notices that it is not only a geographical map, but points to fictional resources beyond the present material ones, its "site-specificity" extends beyond the physical place, to the domain of language and fiction.

In the bottom right corner one finds the text "Humana Vitalium" and Locus Solus 1914. The reference is to French poet and novelist Raymond Roussel's novel *Locus Solus* (Solitary Place), which is an odd story of a scientist inventor, who invites a group of colleagues to the park at his country estate. At that park the group witnesses one oddity after another. These include a hairless cat, a dancing girl in a diamond filled with water, the preserved head of Danton – a leading figure in the French Revolution – and a number of *tableau vivants* inside a huge glass gage, acted by dead people who have been resurrected using the scientist Martial Canterel's serum invention, the *humana vitalium*. The substance, when injected, causes the corpse to continually live the most important day of its past life.

Michel Foucault, in his book on Raymond Roussel¹⁸ mentions that Roussel is "the artist that disappears behind his work; he is hidden by the ready-made, by the "found" conventions of language that he uses to create his work."¹⁹ Foucault refers here to the principles by which Roussel wrote some of his works, including *Locus Solus*, using homonymic relations. With these rules the story extends from one word to another word that sounds similar, thereby always basing itself to the "already said", even if the word is taken

18 Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth, The World of Raymond Roussel*, trans. Charles Ruas, London, New York, Continuum, 1986 [1963].

19 *Ibid.*, 177.

away from its ordinary setting and readopted into an absurd situation. This Foucault viewed as a kind of perversion of what happens in theater, where the "already spoken language" establishes a sense of "verisimilitude for what is seen on stage. The familiar language placed in the mouths of the actors makes the viewer forget the arbitrariness of the situation".²⁰ Roussel thus did quite the opposite when building from everyday sentences most absurd and unlikely situations.

Huyghe also seems fond of such homonymic puns, apparent for example, in the title of his work *Untitled*, as I mentioned before, where the title silently activates the name "Untitled" and with it a layer of the "already said" in contemporary art. And some of the individual curiosities of Huyghe's composting site appear to have found their form as if by similar invisible rules. (For example: We can consider the statue with the "beehive head" as evoking the domed beehive-hairstyle, which was popular in the 1960's).

The second dated reference in the catalogue – "Morel 1940" – refers to a similar story, to the book *The Invention of Morel* by Adolpho Bioy Casares. In this book a fugitive runs off to an island, where he sees a group of people, all oddly unresponsive, performing similar actions, day after day. Among these human-like figures is a woman named Faustine, with whom the fugitive falls in love. Faustine, however, remains cold and unresponsive, despite his efforts (which, incidentally, include making "a small garden for her down by the rocks, enlisting nature's help to gain her confidence"). It then turns out that she and the rest of the group are mere images, projected by the device that the scientist Morel had invented. Morel had recorded a week of their life and played it back over and over. The rays of the device were lethal, but *as projections* they were given

20 *Ibid.*, 180.

eternal life. Since an amorous relationship with an image is obviously doomed to be one-sided, and gives little hope for the fugitive, he decides to “put himself in the picture”, by re-photographing the entire week with Morel’s device, this time placing himself affectionately alongside Faustine, united in the image with such precision that a casual observer would not suspect that he was not part of the original scene.

Similar was also my unease at Huyghe’s work, unaware what is part of the “original” scene, and am I inside it with the man walking the dog (and possibly others I don’t even know about), or am I outside. Perhaps the fictional allusions also serve to illustrate – and simultaneously obfuscate in a suitable way – what the figure of the author could be. Huyghe’s *Untilled* is an area of parallel presents and of repetitions. Encountering it is like entering into the workings of a machine, into an image, a figment. The temporal dimensions of this image are open; it is an open event, between story and history. In this respect the work is a continuation of Huyghe’s long-term project, the *Association of Freed Time*, which is a way of looking into the possibility of new temporalities. Huyghe writes: “The open present is open to any and all incidences that might occur”²¹. His interest in historical temporality has been traced to Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where the “old” methodologies available for historians (those of linkage and causal succession of different eras) are juxtaposed by the “new” methodologies, where gaps, ellipses, interruptions, series and lived duration overtake.²²

Images and figments traverse through time, and settle themselves as if in a repository, charging a place, site or situation with force and power. At the same time as Amelia Barikin writes of

21 Amelia Barikin, *Parallel Presents. The Art of Pierre Huyghe*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2012, 3.

22 Ibid.

Huyghe’s work, “the open present is characterized by an aesthetic of the incomplete. It is most at home in unfinished structures or construction sites. It is not reconcilable with a single, fixed image, and it cannot be substituted for a caption. Like an organism, the open present requires context to survive.”²³

OPERATIONS AND MATERIALITY

To me such temporalities are those of the photographic image in particular.²⁴ Looking at the composting site, its construction materials (stored there for future usage) and the plants, both uprooted and planted, I can easily say “*This will be* and *this has been*”, like Barthes famously said in front of the photograph of Lewis Payne, the assassin soon to be executed – noting that that was the temporal feature in all photographs.²⁵ Huyghe’s work then, has a very photographic time. (One might notice that there too, in that anterior future of the photograph the stake for the image was death like in *Locus Solus* and *The Invention of Morel*.)

Construction sites and photographs (looking at photographs) have a clandestine relation. Construction sites demonstrate, at the same time, the exacting ideals supported by invisible plans and the various unpredictable forms of their execution. Photographs too seem to survey a construction, that of sight itself, constantly at work in the act of seeking, anchoring and letting go. I would even say that photographs themselves *are* construction sites.²⁶ In each

23 Ibid.

24 *The photographic* is here understood similarly to Rosalind Krauss in its event nature, where something is photographic when it adheres to photographic operations (i.e. trace, metonymy, framing, exposure, indexicality...). See e.g. Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Part 2” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1985, 210–219.

25 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections On Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981 [1980], 96.

26 See also Laakso, “Valokuvan työmaa”.

individual photograph one can feel the tearing weight of time, a passing of two different times, and two different times passing us. A photograph can prolong the life of its subject: In a picture a deceased relative continues “living on” as if “on stage” the life that in the real world has already passed. And on the other hand, a photograph freezes on its “stage” a moment, steals a moment that outside the “photographic stage” continues uninterrupted.²⁷

A ruin is the inverse of a construction site, and one can see ruins as images in the same way as tools become images, when no longer in use and veiled by their utilitarian function.

In the book *Athens, Still Remains* Jacques Derrida writes of Jean-François Bonhomme’s photographs, taken to a large degree in the ruins of Athens, that they open up “categories or ‘genres of being’” or “things” (mineral, vegetal, divine, animal, human, technical, reflection, reflection of reflection.)²⁸ It is not only about what one can see in the photographs – the remains of ancient walls, a singular plant rising from the ruins, statues of gods, the look of a traveler or a salesman, a technical instrument. When photographed the ruins make visible the nature of photographic operations: framings, reflections, traces, out of focus, arrests, under- and over-exposures. At the ruins time slows down and so does looking. Photographs force something on us, “something about the world’s own deadness, its inert resistance to whatever it is we may hope or want.”²⁹ Even if photographs “promise the world” they only give objects in which “wrecked reminders of the world are lodged.”³⁰

27 Thierry de Duve, “Time Exposure and Snapshot. The Photograph as Paradox”, in *Photography Theory*, ed. James Elkins, New York and London, Routledge, 2007, 110.

28 Jacques Derrida *Athens, Still Remains*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, New York, Fordhan University Press, 2010 [1996], 35–49.

29 James Elkins, *What Photography Is*, New York and London, Routledge, 2011, xi–xii.

30 *Ibid.*, 22.

The compost area that Huyghe had manipulated (simultaneously a construction site and a ruin) is photographic in its operations and gestures, and also full of life. More than that, Huyghe’s site is also a clearing, even if it is untilled at the moment. And such clearings are the places where culture begins, where culture takes place. In his book *Forests. The Shadow of Civilization* Robert Harrison, re-reading Giambattista Vico’s story on “the giants” in his magnum opus *The New Science* (1725) notes how the forest clearing was necessary for the institutions of humanity, with everything it enables; for example to be used as a meeting place or burial site (where the dead bodies would produce humus for the other humans). But above all the clearing provides a direct connection to the sky, to the heavens above. Because what would one see without the forest clearing? “Thunder rolls, lightning flashes, the giants raise their eyes and become aware of the sky. But what did the giants see when they raised their eyes? What does one see vertically or laterally in a dense forest? The mute closure of foliage. [...] They had to “picture the sky to themselves” in the aspect of a huge animated body: a body not *seen* but *imagined* as there beyond the treetops”.³¹

As a counterpart to this celestial connection Huyghe’s artwork also works the ground. In his study called “The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Actions of Worms with Observation on their Habits” (1881) Charles Darwin watched common English worms for hours on end, watched them making topsoil or “vegetable mould”, by continually bringing to the surface a refined layer of mold. But he ends his study, not with a conclusion or observation about biology or agronomy, but about history. He writes: “Worms have played a more important part in the history of the world than most persons

31 Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests. The Shadow of Civilization*, Chicago, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, 4. (Vico, *New Science*, §377).

would at first assume.”³² Why is this so? This is of course because they have made the earth hospitable to humans, in terms of making the ground fertile for agriculture, and thereby for the rituals and plans of human history. But more than that worms are responsible for preserving those human made artifacts not liable for decay for an indefinitely long time, by burying the artifact beneath their castings. “Archeologists ought to be grateful to worms”, Darwin says.³³ In Darwin’s view worms inaugurate human culture, not because they intend to, or because any divine intention is running through them. And yet they do, and Darwin calls them “small agencies” (of course one of many e.g. bacterial, human, chemical etc.), which have the big accumulated effect. So, the worms have participated in a heterogeneous process where agency has no single locus.

This idea of non-human and material agencies has recently gained new currency. Many of the theoretical insights are traceable to the work of Bruno Latour, who speaks of “actants” in place of actors. An ‘actant’ is a source of action, has efficacy and an ability to do things and alter the cause of events. While here the project is to give also the materiality of artworks and images a new vitality and a new sort of “respect”, the quest is actually one of tremendous political and social import. Following Jane Bennett, for example, one can think that seeing material as intrinsically inanimate could impede the emergence of more ecological and sustainable modes of production and thinking and keeps us enclosed in a view of the world where active human subjects are confronted with passive, inanimate objects and their actions are governed by laws of nature.³⁴

32 Charles Darwin, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms with Observation on their Habits*, London, John Murray, 1881, 305. Quoted in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Durhan and London, Duke University Press, 2010, 95–100.

33 Darwin, 308.

34 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii–xi, 94–95.

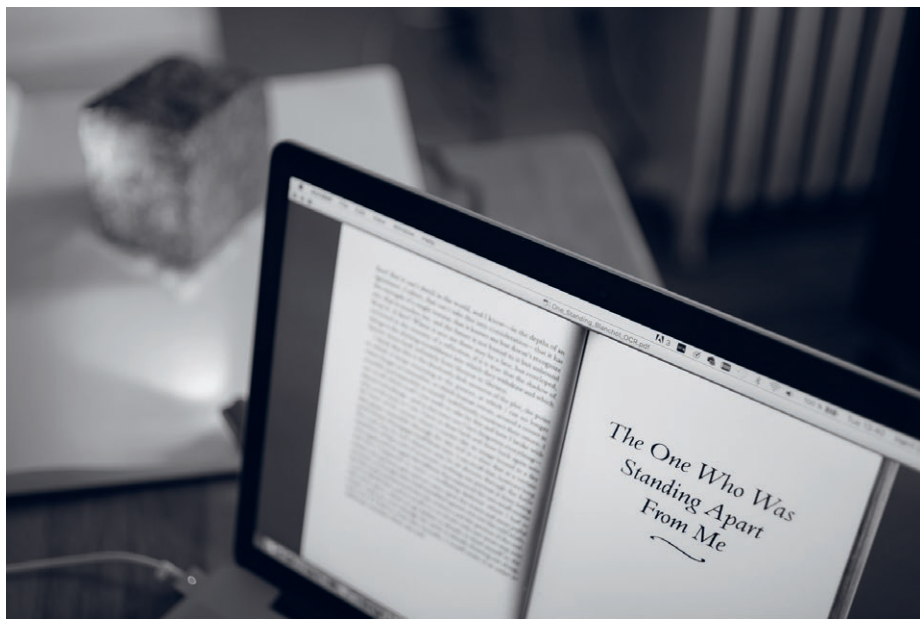
GRAVITY

The second site-specific work by Pierre Huyghe that I want to address, a more recent one, takes us again close to the sky and elucidates similar tensions further. Like many of his other works the *Roof Garden Commission* (2015), which he had also named, early in the process as *Rite Passage*, can also be describe as an installation in which various objects and things, both living and non-living, interact with and brush against a culturally charged location and the activities that take place there.

This time that location was the roof garden of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where many museumgoers like to go to see the spectacular view of Central Park East. The main elements of the installation included: an aquarium complete with a large floating rock and live tadpole shrimp and lampreys, another large rock with four drilled holes (presumably used in transporting the stone to its place) lying on the paving, and a number of displaced paving stones, exposing the filling beneath. These ‘existents’ were complemented by several ‘actions’ that took place: the liquid in the tank periodically become opaque in a mysterious way, then just as unexpectedly becoming transparent again, water seemed to trickle from the tank, weeds sprouted from the dirt under the exposed paving.

The majestic view of the skyscrapers and the park, as well as the insistent knowledge that one is literally standing above the many floors of the museum, filled with artworks and cultural artefacts added to the experience. One also become conscious of the movement of the other museum visitors on the roof, who had interrupted their stroll in the museum’s halls and were now dividing their attention between the cityscape and the artwork.

Huyghe’s work was an installation becoming a constellation: elements were seeking and activating relations with each other and



beyond, to the surrounding site and environment as well as backwards and forwards in time. The work created horizons of expectation: waiting, for example, for the tank to become opaque again. One was also guided to look far back in time. The species living in the tank were ones that have presumably remained practically the same for millions of years, untouched by evolution. The fragile and fleeting existence of the actual live creatures in the aquarium was juxtaposed with the longevity of the species they represented. In a sense the artwork fascinated in the moment, with the elements that were placed on display, while simultaneously inviting to look away in space and time.

The artwork inspired a number of “keys” to assist in negotiating the relation between the elements of the experience (placed there or pre-existing), to assist in deciphering its laws of contiguity. One was tempted to think about *gravity*: the floating rock was aligned with the tall buildings reaching for the skies and juxtaposed with one’s own weight pulling down towards the galleries below. One was invited to think about *plasticity*: as the large boulder was made of the same material from which the paving stones were sculpted, the stones that now had come loose, had been reinvented as material. Some things are capable of adapting to change and have the ability to receive form and to give form, while on the other side of that plasticity there exists the capacity for annihilation.³⁵ Thirdly, the artwork ushered us towards an idea of *inclusion*: we, as the beholders, become implicated as the artwork seeped into our world, our leisurely time, everything we thought was ours to have. This area of sharing was coupled with an awareness of *visibility*, of seeing and of not seeing: there were transformations from transparent to opaque, and we came face to face with the artwork at a place of

35 Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008 [2004], 5. See Malabou’s definitions on ‘plasticity’.

prominence, placed on display and in front of a natural view, overlooking the city, under the skies. And lastly we were confronted with a vague idea of *mortality*: the limit of our species was indicated to us as the artwork charted a geological and paleontological timeline, and placed us inside a clock with no escape. The work placed us in the world; not its own world, not the art world, but the world from which we had been apart.

ADDRESS

The artworks I have addressed, working (and ‘unworking’) at their own limits, undoubtedly create effects concerning *agency* and *implication*, but more than that, self-reflectively, they seem to raise our awareness about the mode of *address*: Can we introduce these things as ‘objects of study’ – studying what the afore mentioned artworks bring to our attention – or should we move towards ‘performing them’, becoming somehow taken over by them? What is the mode of my address – am I addressing them in the sense of *writing about* them, or am I *writing to* them as much as I am writing to you now. Echoing Blanchot’s text “Am I reading and writing? Am I reading and writing at this very moment?”

Agency entails the idea of a force, thing or person that acts to create a particular effect. When we speak of agency we often take it at face value that agency is something to be coveted, granted that we are simultaneously aware of the power of such (non human) agents (like microbes or chemicals) that can be harmful to us in many ways. However, in the arts (and where art intersects with politics) the spectre of the Author is still so vividly in our minds that agency often becomes synonymous with empowerment, with letting us hear the voices previously unheard. Even after “the death of the author”, which seemed to liberate us from approaching an artwork through the identity of the maker of that artwork, we hold dear the

fact that artworks take place in the world, where it matters whose historical context and political views, *whose voice* is being represented. We are tempted to denounce the author's authority – when it suits us – only to restore it at the next instant.

To be sure the points of reference that I have described, involve different positions for their human 'authors', even if those positions are obscured in them. The well known absence of Maurice Blanchot, the man, from public life – which gives us the freedom not to use the man's life as a reference point – can help direct more than the usual amount of attention to the text and language itself. And although Pierre Huyghe is a prominent and visible contemporary artist, many of the events taking place in the artwork are beyond the scope of his control, when the different elements of the work play out their roles, sometimes in active opposition to each other, or exert their force as a mere presence of matter.

It could be said that these cues, inscribed both within the works themselves and in the circumstances of their making, point to (and indexically gesture at) the limits of authorial control – the 'authorial' here referring not only to particular live persons, but to the possibility of any fixed centre of interpretation. Instead, we are invited to listen to the artwork itself more closely. And this is a key question for artistic research: to imagine and to put on stage the voice – or the agency, if you prefer – of the artwork itself.

This proposition is at the same time necessary and highly problematic. It necessitates that we look at the *material* of the artworks (the language, the objects and constellations) in their being instead of in their meaning, – and look at how their material is informed, without at the same time reducing their "life" to matter. It means that we are provisionally encouraged to take a position that could be essentially described as *vitalist*, accepting that there exists some principle that animates matter, which exists in a relation-

ship with matter, but is not itself material in nature.³⁶ This means accepting – perhaps against our own better judgment and reasoning – a sort of *entelechy* that generates and "arranges" the life of an artwork from within. (Aside: Entelechy, which is a term originally coined by Aristotle, refers here to the non-mechanical – and non-psychical – agent responsible for the phenomena of life. It is something impersonal that animates and arranges living bodies without a precise plan, something that distinguishes me from my corpse and a live being from a machine.³⁷ And I realize that all this only makes sense if we accept that artworks are closer to living beings than to mechanical machines. Another detour would be to approach the force of materiality as an exposure to the power of the other (Derrida), or of the "outside" (Blanchot) or to treat it as an apparatus (*dispositivo*) which is "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, interpret, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings".³⁸)

But here I'm drawn especially to the vitalist approach as it is actually not very far from the way in which Pierre Huyghe describes his works as rituals "made out of the rhythmic of autoemergences, events with variations, accelerations" or as "organism, generating itself in a continuous, ever-changing transformation."³⁹ Huyghe's

36 Jane Bennett, "A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism", in *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2010, 48.

37 Bennett, 51 Bennett quotes Dries, "who borrows his term of art entelechy from Aristotle, retaining its sense of a self-moving and self-altering power but rejecting its peculiarly Aristotelian teleology".

38 Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2009, 14.

39 Interview of Huyghe in *Roof Garden Commission. Pierre Huyghe* (catalogue), Ian Alteveer, Meredith Brown, Sheena Wagstaff, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015, 33.

work admittedly also evokes a sense of equality and a lack of categorization for its elements, something that radiates to the realisation of a more general ecology “in the broadest sense of the word; [the] different states of life all around us”.⁴⁰ But these descriptions are not yet the speech of the artwork itself, but once again, words of someone else speaking in its place.

Now that I have got this far I become more and more conscious of something that I realize I had known all along in secret, but had dismissed: When yearning for the speech of the artwork I had only wanted to give it agency, forgetting Blanchot’s words that I myself quoted earlier, professing that I do not understand the words, that “they don’t need that understanding in order to be uttered, they do not speak, they are not interior, they are, on the contrary, without intimacy, [...] ‘outside’ of all speech”. I would therefore have to let go of my search for agency in any positive sense, accept to be dismissed, to be apart from and succumb to the passivity of the work, its inertia.

Yet this double bind immediately draws me back to agency, to re-search agency, as the “force that creates effects”. This is because I am aware that whatever else happens I am nevertheless somehow *implicated* in the event of these works, they orient me in a certain way. In these works I am taken to meet the clandestine companions that the works address – be it language itself, or a general ecology where all is connected.

If the question of authority led us away from the author’s control towards how the works themselves animate the elements involved, then the question of implication is all about how the works animate me, about how I am being taken into – or reimaged into – the im-

40 Ibid.

age of the world that they have created.⁴¹ The works implicate me by making me face the things I cannot escape. They introduce a *speculative art*: An art, which is not truly representative (of a situation), or prescriptive (of the *one* truth), nothing to understand or interpret, but speculative of a certain potential.

There is a sense of emancipation in this “letting things run their course”. What I here have called the viewers’, or audience’s, or beholders’ *implication* is not, in my view anything similar to the active position that is sometimes offered in so called interactive works of art. Because the works I have talked about don’t really offer active positions. Instead they ask to commit without knowing. They offer positions of shared passivity – but of a passivity that is not opposed to activity, but is something radical enough to be passive towards the whole active/passive distinction.

ENVOI

These thoughts have been an attempt to touch on some issues of artistic research, and to be touched by them. I have written about how (and if) works of art might have agency of their own, and about how they might implicate me. I have written *about* artworks. I have tried to introduce, summarise and describe them even against all the resistance that they – in their different ways – put up against such efforts. I have tried to be hospitable to that resistance and also to those obscurities that invite no clarification. Then I have tried to write *alongside* the works, manoeuvring in the spaces that they create, and necessarily feeling at the same time detached, encountering a state of “apartment”.

41 I am reminded of the story *Invention of Morel* by Adolfo Bioy Casares, and how in that story the fugitive is rephotographed into the world that is already an image (‘photographes’ by Morel’s devilish machine).

But this text *itself* is not without form and void. The words I have written have animated me, and have implicated you in my speculation, trapping you within this event.

I feel that I have encountered an insurmountable but necessary distance, where language has adopted features of parables. And the parable, as Jean-Luc Nancy writes “does not go from the image to sense”, but from a figure or image to a seeing, that already pre-exists it – the parable only showing “to those who have already seen” and thus having no illustrative, mimetic or pedagogical function.⁴²

This text has not been about trying to find truths or methods for artistic research but rather to investigate the possibility to partake in an “equal and empty” (and impossible?) position, where no one has privilege (artists and researches included, especially them, us). To me such a position could be a fecund one: senses, reflections and stagings would produce friction against truths, representations and tropes. (It is evident that this leaves little room for arts’ introspective aims.)

All the images, figures, literary references, lightning flashes, exposed skies and gravities are here piled as if in a compost, as remnants from some unknown system. Writing happens between imaginary layers of thinking and matter.

Maybe this even has to do with a more general feeling about the world we inhabit and where invisible and distant things have become forcefully present. Not only the alive and non-living things around and within us, but our whole imaginary culture, which also remains a culture of touch in various ways, of being in touch; where traveling and being away have created new needs for overcoming distance (with technology for example), our technologies of yearn-

ing. All this “touching” has become more and more imaginary – in all its metaphorical dimensions, in all the areas where images no longer are anything to be seen, anything visual. Maybe our world is becoming a huge touch screen, where the virtual is no longer anything remote, where distance is something we can touch.

But here I have limited my approach to considering if such thoughts could be more present when we, in the name of artistic research, approach and puncture the domain of artworks, or admire their space, or eclipse their suns. This here, nothing more, has been my pressing concern.

42 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere. On the Raising of the Body*, trans. Sarah Cliff, Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, 6–9.