

# The “Idea of Natural History” in the work of Pierre Huyghe

*In Theodor Adorno's writing, the term “natural history” has quite a different meaning to its usual scientific usage. Adorno's idea of natural history aims at reconciling, in form and in content, the opposing forces of nature and history with the aim of overcoming the division of natural being and historical being that Adorno considered to be the central problem of critical social theory. Through sprawling installations, the French contemporary artist Pierre Huyghe creates new forms of interaction between natural systems and artificial constructs. In this essay, Huyghe's body of work is submitted to interpretation through Adorno's dialectic of nature and history to establish the relevance of both Huyghe's practice and Adorno's thought to the conditions of the Anthropocene.*

text: **Paul Finnegan**

images: **Pierre Huyghe**

Finding new forms of thought, knowledge, and experience that are suited to the conditions of the Anthropocene is the context for this present text. In this search, French contemporary artist Pierre Huyghe's installations and projects will be examined through the lens of Theodor Adorno's writings on the themes of nature and history. Adorno typically brings the terms nature and history intimately together in his writings, and for particular purposes. An early essay synthesises them in its title — *The Idea of Natural History*. The notion of natural history Adorno expresses here will be central to the task of interpreting Huyghe. Huyghe's experimental enquiry into alternative experiences of nature and history suggest Adorno's writing around these themes as a relevant interpretative framework. The effect of the suspension of any simple definitions of such categories within Huyghe's complex and sprawling installations opens the work up to Adorno's writings on the relationship between nature, history, and art.

With the term natural history, Adorno is not referring to its usage or meaning within the context of the natural sciences. By contrast, Adorno's idea of natural history finds its points of reference within the humanities — visual art, literature and philosophy. Its ambitions, however, are greater than any strict division that the human and natural sciences would permit. The aim of Adorno's natural history is to reconcile an understanding of the human as natural being, or existence with an understanding of the human as the subject or protagonist of a historical condition in which freedom and emancipation are at stake. Such a project inevitably entails a critique of the scientific



conception of nature or at least the worldview that separates nature as the object of science. The idea of natural history must be understood as eluding conceptualisation. Strict definitions of the terms that compose it are actively avoided, for the aim is not to rely on given definitions to see how they fit together but to consider how the terms are defined in and through each other. This is the dialectical method that Adorno inherits from a philosophical tradition stretching from Hegel to Marx. The advantage of approaching nature and history dialectically is the possibility of transcending these concepts, which seems such a necessary task in the context of the Anthropocene. We see under the geological label of the Anthropocene the unprecedented entanglement of natural systems with the creations of human history. This entanglement calls for new ways of seeing nature and history and to see how definitions of nature and history are related through their opposition. Dialectical thinking is well placed to serve this task if we agree with Thomas H. Ford's that "the Anthropocene is an essentially dialectical concept".<sup>1</sup>

The opposition of nature and history that must be dialectically overcome is, according to Adorno, based on two binaries by which they are primarily distinguished. The first is the opposition of transience and permanence. For Adorno, the concept of nature has been mythified as that which is essentially static, timeless and predestined. History, on the other hand, is transient, contingent and the product of novelty. The second is the binary of unity and division. Nature is the unified and harmonious state of being, and history, as an unresolved project that upsets and unsettles this harmony and unity is characterised by its incompleteness. Adorno seeks to reconcile nature and history by identifying transience as a quality that nature and history share. Upon the second opposition of unity and disharmony, he aims to challenge received ideas by critiquing the concept of nature as unity. Within the dialectic, and according to its logic, this reconciliation is a continuous process rather than a simple outcome.

This text examines the idea of natural history particularly in terms of its given association with the concept of allegory and the image of the ruin, and an attempt to frame Huyghe's practice through these ideas. Adorno takes the concept of allegory from Walter Benjamin, and for both these men, the allegorical mode is the aesthetic, poetic and experiential embodiment of the dialectical method. Allegorical interpretation is proposed as a way of seeing art but also as a way of seeing the real world. It is (and here we must turn more to Benjamin) the means to appreciate the dialectical character of the relationship between nature and history in the experience of art, the products of a culture more broadly, and the creations of nature itself. Huyghe's body of work will, therefore, be evaluated in terms of Benjamin's identification of the reconciliation of nature and history with the allegorical mode. Benjamin's discussion of the allegorical brings in two further concepts that will likewise be explored in relation to Huyghe's work. For Benjamin, the condition of allegorical interpretation is the

## **Pierre Huyghe**

*Zoodram 5*, 2011

Aquarium, live marine organisms, resin shell  
after Constantin Brâncuși's *Sleeping Muse* (1910)

134.6 x 99.1 x 76.2 cm

© Pierre Huyghe

Image courtesy of the artist;

Marian Goodman Gallery, New York;

Esther Schipper, Berlin; Hauser & Wirth, London;

Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Photo credit: Pierre Huyghe

melancholic gaze. Allegory and melancholia become components in a particular brand of ruin theory in Benjamin's writing. Images of decay and ruin in Huyghe's work will be subjected to this gaze in which both nature and history become ruins.

In conclusion, a parallel is drawn between Huyghe's stated aim of making art that is indifferent to the human spectator, and Adorno and Benjamin's realisation that the idea of natural history amounts to a degradation of human experience. Decay, ruin and irrevocable transience, Huyghe and Benjamin may well agree, are spectacles that maintain a certain indifference to the human observer. Both Adorno and Benjamin see this as regrettable, but Benjamin embraces it as a necessity in an active project to approach the idea of natural history by erasing the human subject. Huyghe's quite specific engagement with these themes, in which ruined forms are seen in the context of ecological systems thinking, will be considered in terms of what is useful in Benjamin — for forming insights on the work — but also how Huyghe transforms the motif of the ruin and surpasses Benjamin's vision to serve the purpose of Anthropocenic thinking.

### **The dialectic of nature and history**

Adorno identifies the concept of nature with that of fate, destiny, law - nature as a predetermined eternal reality. It is this conceptualisation that Adorno seeks to negate in his 1932 essay *The Idea of Natural History*. Adorno argues that this concept of nature, moreover, is constituted by and through its opposing concept — that of history. Natural being is defined as static and timeless, and historical being as a sequence of novelties, contingencies, and accidents. History stands in opposition to timeless nature "as a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new".<sup>2</sup> Consistent with the Hegelian tradition, Adorno views the subject of history (the human being) in emancipatory terms — as the expression and articulation of a liberatory force. Adorno, however, departs from Hegel's philosophy of history in which Geist (spirit or mind), as the agent of history (understood to belong to both the individual and the collective) does not inevitably evolve in the direction of freedom. This is Adorno's pessimism. For both Hegel and Adorno, history is defined as that which promises human liberation through the possibility of the occurrence of the new. This liberation is the liberation of human nature or nature in the human. Finding himself in less optimistic times than Hegel, Adorno diagnoses a regressive tendency imminent to the progress of the spirit, a corruption of the enlightenment ideals of modernity that he names "instrumental" reason. Adorno sees reason ambivalently as both the prerequisite condition of liberation and as the instrument of the domination of nature (both human and non-human).<sup>3</sup> For Adorno, history, therefore, is the possibility for both the liberation and the domination of human nature.

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Adorno sees any ultimate opposition between nature and history as false and considers that a unification or reconciliation of the two (which he identifies as the central problem of critical social theory) is a task requiring a dialectical consideration of their opposition. The dialectical movement is the overcoming of the contradictory aspects of opposing concepts through recognising that the former concept contains something of the latter and visa-versa. In this recognition, a synthesis may be found. But for Adorno, and Hegelian philosophy of history more broadly, the operation of the dialectic is much more than just a way of doing philosophy — it is the mechanism behind historical change itself.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Adorno's dialectic of nature and history should not just be seen as an interpretative framework, but a force behind the emergence of concrete relations between nature and history as history. Adorno warns us that to grasp the idea of natural history will not be a straightforward or easy task, characterised as it is by its dialectical structure. The idea of natural history goes beyond the conceptual categories of both nature and history. It is not a synthesis of opposing concepts through a simple modification of these concepts but rather a transformation of these concepts into a third.

### **Dialectical nature**

The concept of nature that is to be dissolved ... would come closest to the concept of myth. [...] what as fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history. [...] The misconception of the static character of mythical elements is what we must free ourselves from if we want to arrive at a concrete representation of natural history.<sup>5</sup>

Dialectical thinking, recognising that the same always contains something of its other, resists "identity thinking",<sup>6</sup> and applied to the natural world resists both the idea of the possibility of a fixed concept of nature as well as a recognition of the flux of nature itself. Adorno's move is not simply to replace one concept of nature with another, but to challenge the concept of nature as fixed at all, either ontologically or epistemologically. The alignment of Adorno's critique of nature and Huyghe's project can be seen on a number of levels – in form and content and perhaps even in implicit references to Adorno's writings. The resistance of identity thinking is recognisable in Huyghe's work as the resistance to classificatory thinking. One of Huyghe's stated aims is to problematise classification systems such as Linnaean taxonomy or even those of ordinary language. Huyghe's animals are not to be encountered as having a fixed identity according to such thinking.<sup>7</sup> The identity of these animals is fluid. The entities populating his installations are to be no more identified with the names or concepts "dog", "fish", "crab", "microbe" than the audience for the work is to be identified as "human". A skinny Iberian Hound features in a number of Huyghe's





**Pierre Huyghe**

*Untitled*, 2011–12

Alive entities and inanimate things, made and not made. Dimensions and duration variable

© Pierre Huyghe

Image courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin.

Commissioned and produced by dOCUMENTA (13) with the support of Colección CIAC AC, Mexico;

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installations and environments. The name that the animal answers to is “Human” as if to confirm the instability of such labels.

Adorno’s role for art, in Flodin’s reading, is as a “second reflection [that] reveals a crack in the cultural construction of nature and through that crack, we may glimpse the possibility of a nature beyond this construction”.<sup>8</sup> In a contemporary context, the argument that nature is a cultural construction may be considered (in certain terms) settled. But Huyghe can be seen have transformed the terms of Adorno’s critique. Huyghe’s projects demonstrate the thought that the Anthropocene marks the transition of the social construction of nature from the discursive to the material realm. Huyghe, therefore, changes the terms by which art can reveal the construction of nature. The holistic impact on the natural order of the planet by forms of human agency transforms physical nature in an equivalent sense to the transformation of the image of nature through the idea of nature.

This shift of critique is reflected also in Catherine Malabou’s philosophical use of epigenetics. Epigenesis is the principle that gene expression is modified by the environment of the individual carrier of those genes. Where this mechanism is active the final form of an organism is therefore not fully programmed in advance, but is the result of an interaction between genome and environment. Malabou considers this philosophically and politically significant. Dorothea von Hantelmann puts forward Malabou’s theory as a context for Huyghe’s use of biological systems. According to von Hantelmann, for Malabou the emerging field of epigenetics reveals that interpretation and symbolisation is not something outside of material life. Within the feedback loop between genome and environment, the mechanism of epigenesis is recognised as a kind of “interpretation”. By describing it thus Malabou extends the discursive character of post-modern social theory to the domain of nature itself. Malabou’s argument, “places the development of all living beings in an intermediary space between biology and history or culture”, creating “a hinge between the symbolic and the biological”.<sup>9</sup> It is this hinge she says Huyghe has created in *After A Life Ahead*.

### **Ruins**

We see in Huyghe’s body of work the recurrent motif of the ruin. In Huyghe’s complex installations images of neglect and abandonment prevail. Architectural spaces are given over to an uncontrolled occupation of the non-human and objects from art history are left to see what other non-human agencies will do with them. The focal point of Huyghe’s seminal dOCUMENTA (13) site-specific work *Untilled 2011-12* is a compost heap where culture and history are left to decompose: An oak tree that Joseph Beuys’ originally planted for Documenta 7 lies uprooted, weeds find niches in stacks of concrete slabs reminiscent of a Carl Andre sculpture, and a colony of bees make a home from Max Weber’s 1930s statue of a reclining female nude. The ruin also appears as a central motif in Benjamin’s reflections on



the relationship between nature and history in *The Birth of German Tragic Drama*. Adorno draws on Benjamin's text when he states that according to a certain kind of perception "everything existing transforms itself into ruins and fragments". The gaze that transforms everything into a vision of ruin and is essential for "radical natural-historical thought"<sup>10</sup> is necessarily melancholic. Huyghe's scenarios of decay and loss, as both physical and historical realities, may also invite Benjamin's melancholic gaze.

Huyghe typically references human history through the objects of art history: A broken 19<sup>th</sup> Century neoclassical statue covered in moss, Monet's *Water Lilies seen from below*, a submerged Brancusi sculpture. These images recall Benjamin's definition of the ruin as "history merg[ing] into the setting".<sup>11</sup> Huyghe's ruins are the ruins of modernism and colonialism. Their quality of merging is these artefacts' newly found porosity to biotic systems. Their setting is the set of ecological relations that they encounter. Huyghe's interest here seems to be how these cultural artefacts, in states of neglect and decomposition, can enter into and compose new relations. We might understand these relations as sculpture's *biologically* "expanded field"<sup>12</sup> - to misappropriate Rosalind Krauss's phrase.

Benjamin's ruin theory is presaged by Georg Simmel. However, in Simmel's 1911 text *The Ruin* the dialectical tension between nature and history has absented itself. For Simmel "the unique balance - between... inert matter... and informing spirituality breaks the instant a building crumbles"<sup>13</sup>. By contrast, whatever we are seeing in Huyghe's strange states of decay is not nature as a leveller of spirit or signifier of human hubris. In Huyghe's ruins the fight between matter and spirit, nature and history, is not yet settled. It continues in a contested space of multi-species politics. Ecological thinking is present here in denying the opposition between human order and natural order that Simmel intimates.<sup>14</sup> Simmel goes on to claim that ruins express the truth that "all that is human is taken from earth and to earth shall return".<sup>15</sup> This wisdom is exactly what Adorno challenges as the myth of nature as an eternal cycle in *The Idea of Natural History*. Huyghe's desire to eliminate human direction as much as possible<sup>16</sup> frames the work within the art historical discourse of the ruin. However, the emergent assemblages of artefacts and biological agents that take over their own post-natural evolution put aside many inherited values associated with order and disorder.

Benjamin's somewhat bizarre formulation that through the melancholic gaze everything is transformed into a ruin arises from his indebtedness to the theological concept of a fallen nature. Pensky recalls the significance of this idea to Benjamin - "from the theological perspective of fallen nature the baroque regarded material objects... the objects of physical nature... themselves as containing within their very finitude ... the compacted moral-religious history of the world."<sup>17</sup> Importantly, Benjamin sees this mystical notion as having a critical

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agency within the context of modernity. His logic is thus: If nature is fallen, then it is itself the outcome of a historical event. Fallen nature as the assertion of a historical (qua ontologically incomplete) nature opposes the concept of nature as unity. Furthermore, by applying an immanent critique, the meaning of the myth of the fall can be secularised as an account of the social and historical construction of the concept of nature. For Benjamin, and arguably for Huyghe, nature is historicised by virtue that it is not yet complete. It is a mere fragment of the unified nature that existed before the fall. Seeing nature as a ruin, as a fragment, and thus as paradoxically artefact-like renders nature uncanny. The ambiguity of what is natural and what is artificial in Huyghe's work brings on the uncanny perception that nature is itself a ruin.

### Natural history as allegory

In the language of the Baroque, the fall of a tyrant is equivalent to the setting of the sun. This allegorical relationship already encompasses the presentiment of a procedure that could succeed in interpreting concrete history as nature and to make nature dialectical under the aspect of history. The realization of this conception is once more the idea of natural history.<sup>18</sup>

Here, Adorno states the importance of allegory as a means of thinking the idea of natural history. Within this context, Beatrice Hanssen comments - allegory is to be "no longer merely interpreted as a historically specific trope but rather as a form of memory or historical commemoration" and that "as a historico-philosophical category, allegory... testifies to a profoundly altered relationship with nature".<sup>19</sup> In a further equation that again alludes to the mystical tradition Benjamin asserts that allegory is "nature's mourning".<sup>20</sup> Allegory, as a way of seeing, and not bound by its historical context of the Baroque or even Benjamin's era might be identified as a useful tool in the critical perception of the Anthropocene. Seen by Adorno as a means of revealing the suffering of a dominated nature, allegory becomes relevant to the present.

It is proposed here that the biological entities and systems in Huyghe's work can be read as an allegory of history. This is approached through a discussion of the role of teleology in biology and the philosophy of history. It is permitted by an analogy that can be made between history and organic life according to their teleological character. Modern biology dispenses with a future-oriented teleology, describing the evolution of organs without the language of aims and ends. However, within a functional account of organic structures, a weak teleology still lingers. A retrospective teleology (in contrast to a future-oriented one) is implicit in the language of functional biology — organs evolve according to no plan but their function is inevitably

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conceptualised as a certain kind of purposiveness. Benjamin and Adorno's philosophy of history has a parallel weak or retrospective teleology (in contrast to Hegel's purpose and ends focussed idea of historical progress). They consider historical events to be meaningful only through the benefit of hindsight. Seeing the sense, reason and direction in history can only happen after the fact.<sup>21</sup> Within these views, in both natural history and human history we see that what has happened to get us to the present had to happen to get us here, but also that there was no necessity for history to happen in the way it did. We can see in Huyghe's work the presentation of living systems as essentially contingent but none-the-less highly coherent. Their suggested plasticity of behaviour and form testifies to the open-endedness of natural processes. If we read these animal bodies allegorically as the anatomy of human history Huyghe's living organisms stand for a certain idea of historical events as prospectively contingent but retrospectively necessary.

### **Nature as unified or divided**

Idealism and classicism share the idea of beauty as a unified and seamless whole, often compared to the self-sufficient organism. While Adorno ... expresses a certain agreement with this view... he never-the-less believes that modern art needs to ... problematize this ability in order to avoid deceiving us into thinking that reconciliation is achieved ... That is why Adorno pushes the idea of fracture, brokenness, or reflection as necessary for art's truth content.<sup>22</sup>

It is as fragments, or rather as forms showing the lines by which they risk fracturing apart, that Huyghe's animals embody the dissonance between nature and history. As direct interventions into the biotic, Huyghe uses artifice to produce a dissonance in our perception of the unity of organisms. The dog mentioned earlier and that appears in more than one exhibition context is subtly visually altered by Huyghe. Its form is "broken up" in Huyghe's words by the application of pink dye to one of its legs. His stated aim is to render the animal "separated from herself".<sup>23</sup> Given the emphasis on allegorical interpretation in this present text, such an adjustment testifies (as allegory) to the untruth of harmony in the conditions of modernity, which Adorno considers to be the primary purpose of modern art. Elsewhere Huyghe draws our attention to how discoveries in the life sciences themselves confound our expectations of organic unity and harmony. The solitary fish that occupies the aquarium in *After A Life Ahead* is perfectly divided fore and aft in the same colour scheme as Huyghe's dog, but this time the sharply abstract delineation of its form is part of the marine animal's natural colouring. Furthermore, two peacocks present during the opening days of the same project are examples of genetic mosaicism. Sometimes referred to as "chimeras" the body tissues of these birds are composed of more than one genotype.



**Pierre Huyghe**

*Untitled (Human Mask), 2014*

Film, colour, sound

19 mins

© Pierre Huyghe

Image courtesy of the artist;

Anna Lena Films, Paris

Although this division is not visible it is deeper and more essential than anything we may see.

The dislocation of the Iberian Hound's visual form is in striking contrast and contradiction to its organic wholeness. Colour functions as an arbitrary segregation on the level of appearance - a breaking up of doggy unity on the phenomenal level, whilst its organic unity persists. Huyghe's divided entities still thrive and continue to appear to act in a coordinated and singular way. The dislocation between perception and the real within these examples implies a denial of classicism's principle of beauty in art as the organic unity of perception and reality. Such strategies imply divisions within what we tend to consider biological unities but also a schism between mind and nature, subject and object.



### **Transience in physical systems and the leaking of fiction into reality**

In nature, the allegorical poets saw eternal transience, and here alone did the saturnine vision of these generations recognize history.<sup>24</sup>

Benjamin sees the reconciliation of nature and history only negatively in the moment of their mutual passing away — in the experience of transience. Adorno, developing Benjamin's thought, says "the deepest point where history and nature converge lies precisely in this element of transience".<sup>25</sup> What Benjamin and Adorno refer to with the term transience is not the change or flux of repeated cycles, of the kind Simmel implies, but rather the concept of irreversible and irrevocable change. Cyclical change amounts to an eternal stasis, and the return of

nature to the mythic dimension. Radical transience, however, smashes this myth. According to Adorno transience in both nature and history is that which prevents a return to a previous state, a state before modernity in historical terms, or a more archaic organisation of matter in physical terms. Transience accounts for fleetingness and loss. In his lectures on *History and Freedom* from 1964-65, Adorno offers Hölderlin's poem *The Shelter at Harhdht* as a model for understanding what he means by radical transience — a concept upon which his idea of natural history is so dependent it. The poem tells the story of an exiled medieval king Ulrich who evades his captors by hiding in a natural rock shelter in the forests of Harhdht, Germany. Flodin tells us that what is important to Adorno in Hölderlin's telling of this story is that "only because the traces of Ulrich's stay at the natural shelter have long since been covered by vegetation, does nature become eloquent, expressing a transience that points beyond itself".<sup>26</sup> The expression of transience in Hölderlin's poem is, furthermore, one that reflexively expresses the transience of the poem itself. For Adorno, it is the degree to which this or other artworks reflexively "confront [their] own inevitable transience and decay"<sup>27</sup> that art realises itself.

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In Huyghe's installations technological elements — often conceived as machines with an input, an output, and a feedback mechanism — have the role of mediating between biological and man-made elements. These cybernetic systems may be seen as the sculptural equivalent of dialectical tensions and forces. In his contribution to Tino Sehgal's 2016 curatorial project at The Palais De Tokyo, the rate of growth of human cells in an incubator links to the air conditioning system of the museum — thus allowing new relationships to emerge between heterogeneous elements. Elsewhere, Huyghe's uses technologies of feedback to deliberately isolate living systems from their context, such as the aquarium works of the *Zoodram* and *Nymphéas Transplant series*.<sup>28</sup> Aquariums maintain an independent equilibrium by regulating temperature, oxygen and water quality. In these examples, the use of technology achieves a kind of false stasis of natural microcosms. These particular aquatic environments are without place, mobile, itinerant — and in this sense geographically supremely transient. This characteristic is in contrast to the artificially sustained timelessness of the world behind the glass. But even this permanence reveals itself to be illusory when we consider that these works are not fully isolated systems. They are sustained by electricity generated elsewhere and with an inevitable ecological impact. Arresting transience in one place has a cost in another. In this analysis, these works become a critique of the aesthetic value of permanence.

To move from an analysis of transience in physical systems to one that locates it as a literary and art historical motif reflects Huyghe's interest in "the vitality of the image, in the way an idea, an artefact, leaks into a biological or mineral reality".<sup>29</sup> In Huyghe's most recent

major work *Umwelt 2018* the Serpentine Gallery is overrun with Bluebottle flies. The fly's association with transience in art history is not lost on Huyghe. Within the memento mori and vanitas traditions, flies are a reminder of the transience of life. Within the total context of the show, this signifier comes to life accompanied by flickering images generated by a neural network. The images appear and pass away with a fleetingness that the human eye struggles to keep up with. Flies landing on the wall scale LCD panels on which these images appear become pixels or rather dead pixels. The images (if they can be called this) jitter and twitch with fly-like agitation. They have the quality of pareidolic hallucinations. We learn that the images are the result of an AI algorithm translating the data from the electrical activity of the visual cortex of a human subject. The work thereby becomes a window on the interior of human thought. *Umwelt* embodies the transience of thought but also the possibility that the ephemerality of thought itself can be objectified and archived. Such experiments foretell the possibilities of contemporary technology to objectify, and therefore to potentially instrumentalise, the natural phenomenon of thought itself.

### **Natural history as the erasure of human experience**

Nature and history are concepts and as such refer to a range of human practices of the organisation of otherwise disparate sets of empirical experiences. If dialectically fused into their 'zero-point' of indifference, however, these two concepts generate an idea, which is a modality of concept with no correlate in any given experience. [...] The idea of natural history ... amounts to a degradation of experience as a perspective, or a way of seeing.<sup>30</sup>

The ruin as the concrete image that emerges at the site of nature and history at their moment of maximum dialectical interpenetration is allowed or encouraged to present itself once the subjective intentionality of the magisterial subject, the sovereign observer, is erased so far as possible from the site of ruin.<sup>31</sup>

In these two quotes from Max Pensky, there is an account of Benjamin and Adorno's view or the role of human experience in their shared idea of natural history. In the first, Pensky identifies Adorno's acknowledgement of the problem of experience, and in the second, he describes Benjamin's embrace of it. Pensky then goes on to describe Benjamin's active erasure of the human subject within the rationale of his ruin theory as "a complex and frankly somewhat unhinged experimental methodology". What seemed unhinged when Pensky wrote this in 2004 seems less so after the rise of non-anthropocentrism and anti-correlationism in art and philosophy of the 2010s. What must have seemed implausible before



**Pierre Huyghe**

Retrospective. Exhibition view, Centre Georges Pompidou, September 2013 – January 2014

Photo by Pierre Huyghe © Pierre Huyghe Image courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Hauser & Wirth, London; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris Image courtesy of the artist; Anna Lena Films, Paris

the recent critique of Kantian “correlationism”<sup>32</sup> confirms Benjamin’s relevance to this current endeavour. Benjamin’s reflections on the ruin represent a form of non-anthropocentrism *avant la lettre*.

The degradation of the subject in Benjamin’s allegorical version of the idea of natural history is explained thus: Allegorical signification is the subjective projection of meaning onto a nature that is indifferent to interpretation, accompanied by the recognition of this very indifference. The melancholic gaze is the result of the regrettable dialectical play of meaning and indifference. For Benjamin, human experience and meaning is a necessary sacrifice for seeing nature as history and history as nature. Considering this final characteristic, the question for us becomes – what connection can be made between Benjamin’s realisation of the experiential inaccessibility of the idea of natural history and contemporary attempts to encounter the Anthropocene by de-privileging the human perspective? What has been seen as the relevance of Benjamin’s de-centring of the



subject in the context of the post-modern critique of authenticity has quite a different relevance in the context of multi-species politics in the Anthropocene.

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*The sleeping head's movements are  
neither alive nor dead. The recol-  
lection of nature, in this case, is an  
undead perversion of the reconcilia-  
tion of matter and spirit.*  
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Huyghe's explicit non-anthropocentrism aims to erase the sovereign (human) subject. And Huyghe, like Benjamin, sees decay as a spectacle that maintains a certain indifference to the human observer. In *After A Life Ahead*, the seats of the former ice rink that is the site of the installation are conspicuously silent and empty. Placed on a thawed slab of the disused rink an immortal line of human HELA cells grow — a "human" form of life lacking an experiential dimension. An aquarium periodically blacks out denying visual access. However, subsequently, to these degradations of human experience, Huyghe proposes alternative models of experience to replace them. A bee colony — a recurring in a number of projects — presents a model of distributed perception and cognition antithetical to Benjamin's sovereign subject. The decentred intelligence of such systems has analogies in contemporary neuroscience's insight into the de-centred operation of consciousness in the brain. Rather than making art that is not to be experienced at all, Huyghe's art is to be encountered by subjectively projecting oneself outside of a particular and historically contingent way of conceiving of sense, mind, and experience.

### **The natural-historical human condition**

While it may be dubious to consider the title of the 2011 piece *Zoodram 5 (Recollection)* as an Adorno quote, to consider the work in this regard may be revealing. Adorno and Horkheimer's invitation to internalise the idea of natural history is summed up in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as "the recollection of nature in the subject".<sup>33</sup> Into a large aquarium incorporating dramatic lighting Huyghe introduces, among other things, a Giant (tropical) Hermit Crab and a perfect copy of Constantin Brancusi's 1910 sculpture *Sleeping Muse*. The hermit crab following its instinct to improvise protection from any suitable hollow form that it finds, usually the shells of other sea life, makes an unlikely home of Brancusi's head. If we consider this arrangement as an embodiment, expression or even allegory of Adorno's remembrance of nature in the human, what does it tell us about what it would be to internalise the idea of natural history? If we take Huyghe's sculpture as evidence of Adorno's "recollection" we can speculate on the nature of this transformation. It is a transformation that we can only evaluate by being sensitive to its aesthetic qualities. If we see this image as Brancusi's anthropomorphic sculpture recognising itself as nature, the result of this recognition is quite disconcerting. The resemblance of a human head, in any expressive quality, that it still has, removed from its usual conditions of display and given this new life, is distinctly uncanny. The hermit crab carries the serene visage of *Sleeping Muse* rather like a bad puppeteer would orchestrate the movements of a





puppet, producing awkward and graceless movements. This reanimation of the human image by a non-human agency, if seen as the expression of the non-human in the human, might be read as the surfacing of the unconscious (as nature) behind the psychic construction of the subject. But what may sound desirable theoretically in Huyghe's *Zoodram 5* is diabolical. The sleeping head's movements are neither alive nor dead. The recollection of nature, in this case, is an undead perversion of the reconciliation of matter and spirit.

We see again the motif of an animal presented in anthropomorphic disguise in *Untitled (Human Mask) 2014*. The film shows buildings deserted after the Fukushima Nuclear Plant disaster. The only inhabitant of these abandoned spaces is a Rhesus Macaque wearing a traditional Noe theatre mask. We occasionally catch a glint of the animal's eyes through the mask. This uncanny spectacle reverses the mimetic function of humans assuming animal form that anthropologists have commented so extensively on, and that has been seen as the archaic basis for art and ritual. Within this context, the ritual of wearing animal disguises is typically described as securing a contract between the human and the non-human. As an inversion of this motif, Huyghe's masked monkey inverts the structure of human/animal relations.<sup>34</sup> Huyghe's film in its theme of radioactive pollution and desertion presents a scenario where nature and history are unreconciled.<sup>35</sup> The scenario may also be framed within an art historical convention where the image of a monkey is a substitute for the human, in which terms this work becomes about "the human condition"<sup>36</sup> — a description Guggenheim Bilbao gives to the piece. But Huyghe's image, which could equally argue that to be human is only to be human as a mask, problematises both a straightforward animal symbolism and the implicit essentialism in the term human condition. What remains after the withdrawal of humans from Fukushima, and what is transformed into fiction in the film, is the non-human fated to continue the charade of playing human. Masks conventionally signify fate in many theatrical traditions. Or even, in this abandoned place, the fate of the non-human to always be seen through the human even and paradoxically in the absence of the human gaze. In the confusion between the human and the non-human within Huyghe's film, the Fukushima disaster may be seen as a dissonant natural history. The impact of this radiation accident exists over deep time. Within the deep past, the identity of the human becomes indistinct from that of the primate with which it shares a common evolutionary lineage. Like *Recollection* the scenario of *Untitled (Human Mask)* is a recollection of the non-human in the human. But, the closeness of the animal protagonist to us in behaviour and form, invites a non-anthropocentric reading where within this

### **Pierre Huyghe**

p.101 - *After ALife Ahead*, 2017

Exhibition view, Skulptur Projekte Münster,  
10 June – 1 October 2017

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Photo credit: Ola Rindal, Agnese Spolverini,  
Marta Vovk, Angela Pye, James Voorhies,  
Pierre Huyghe Studio

Photo by Pierre Huyghe © Pierre Huyghe  
Image courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Hauser & Wirth, London; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris Image courtesy of the artist; Anna Lena Films, Paris



fiction the monkey ancestor sees its evolutionary future as human, a prophetic dream in a proto-human mind.

### **Conclusion: Mythic nature in the Anthropocene**

The dialectical critique of nature and history reveals the illusory ways in which history is reified as nature and that are complicit with the domination of nature. It also reveals the possibility of the liberation of human and non-human nature within and through this dialectic. In the conclusion to *The Idea of Natural History*, Adorno addresses György Lukács's statement that revolutionary historical consciousness starts from a critique of mythic nature. Myth, Flodin summarises, is complicit in the domination of nature by turning nature into "something merely static and unchangeable; nature perceived as the continuous repetition of the same events", for it follows that "what can be predicted can be manipulated for one's own benefit".<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Adorno following Lukacs, diagnoses the relationship between history and nature within consumer capitalism as one in which history is petrified as nature. Capitalism assumes the false and illusory status of "second nature". However, Flodin continues, it is Adorno's view that although "our nature dominating society has congealed into second nature ... through philosophical interpretation, it can be exposed as something man-made that has come into being historically, and thus possible to transform".<sup>38</sup> Adorno's dialectical critique of nature and history reveals both the illusory ways in which history is reified as nature (and that are complicit in the domination of nature) but also the possibility of the liberation of human and non-human nature within this dialectic. Perhaps through the experience of Huyghe's work, such a historical consciousness might be glimpsed and glimpsed as a consciousness that must include both the human and the non-human as historical agents.

Huyghe's practice transform the thesis of the social construction of nature, by seeing this construction in both discursive and realist terms. In Huyghe's installations, the openness of nature to the production of novelty is facilitated through the setting up of feedback conditions between natural and technological elements. As such, Huyghe proposes alternative histories and futures for nature. We may really construct nature (or rather nature will construct itself) if nature can reinvent itself continuously. But there are remaining aesthetico-political questions about Huyghe's strategy of indifference to the human observer. Is the indifference of nature to human experience in Huyghe's work, it might be asked, an allegory of the indifference of the machinery of capitalism itself? Adorno warns us that consumer capitalism seems timeless and unassailable in the eyes of its subjects by associating itself with the mythic timelessness of nature. The indifference of the living systems in Huyghe's work to human subjectivity, as the indifference of nature to human meaning, may, with a small shift of emphasis, be no better metaphor for the indifference of capitalism. On the other hand, Huyghe's biotic/abiotic/technological compositions (or decompositions), although characterised by their indifference to human subjectivity, and despite this, may promise to be models of a non-instrumentalised, liberated (human) nature in their capacity to resist mythic nature, and to resist the petrification of history as mythic nature.

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***Huyghe's practice transform the thesis of the social construction of nature, by seeing this construction in both discursive and realist terms.***  
.....

#### **Pierre Huyghe**

p.102-103 - *Umwelt*, 2018

Exhibition view, Serpentine Gallery,

October 2018 – February 2019

Deep image reconstruction, sensors, sound, scent, incubator, flies, sanded wall, dust

© Pierre Huyghe

*Image courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Hauser & Wirth, London; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris*

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Photo by Pierre Huyghe © Pierre

Huyghe Image courtesy of the artist; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper,

## Endnotes

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- [2] Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," *Telos* 60, (June 1984): 111.
- [3] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 149.
- [4] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
- [5] Adorno "Natural History," 111-23.
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- [8] Camilla Flodin, "Adorno on Hölderlin's Late Poetry," *Adorno Studies* 2, no. 1 (September 2018): 7.
- [9] Dorothea von Hantelmann, "Situating Cosmologies: Pierre Huyghe's *Untitled and After A Life Ahead*," Serpentine Galleries, accessed July 1, 2019, [https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/files/press-releases/full\\_press\\_pack\\_-\\_pierre\\_huyghe\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/files/press-releases/full_press_pack_-_pierre_huyghe_final_0.pdf).
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- [14] Sven Lutticken, "Abstract Habitats: Installations of Coexistence and Coevolution," *Grey Room* 59 (Spring 2015), <http://www.greyroom.org/issues/59/1/abstract-habitats-installations-of-coexistence-and-coevolution/>
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- [16] Pierre Huyghe, "Living Systems," interview by Phillippe Chiambaretta and Eric Troncy, PCA-STREAM, March 2014, <https://www.pca-stream.com/en/articles/living-systems-14>.
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- [19] Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 76-77.
- [20] Benjamin, *Origin*, 159.
- [21] Peter Thompson, "The Frankfurt School – Part 2: Negative Dialectics," *The Guardian*, April 1, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/01/negative-dialectics-frankfurt-school-adorno>.
- [22] Flodin, "Adorno on Hölderlin," 12.
- [23] Pierre Huyghe, "Pierre Huyghe," 30.
- [24] Benjamin, *Origin*, 179.
- [25] Adorno "Natural History," 119.
- [26] Flodin, "Adorno on Hölderlin," 5-6.
- [27] Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin*, 79.
- [28] For ideas in animal ethology that have influenced Huyghe's here and elsewhere see, Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With a Theory of Meaning* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Such spaces create a concrete equivalent of Jacob von Uexküll's insight that the subjective worlds of animals are irredeemably isolated from each other. The viewer occupies the liminal space between the gallery as one frame and the aquarium as another. The mutual isolation of the aquarium inhabitants and the human viewers makes Uexküll's insight of the absolute non-relation of the experiential worlds of different species into a spectacle.
- [29] Sky Godden, "Pierre Huyghe Explains His Buzzy Documenta 13 Installation and Why His Work is Not Performance Art," *Artinfo Canada*, August 30, 2012, <http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/822127/pierre-huyghe-explains-his-buzzy-documenta-13-installation-and-why-his-work-is-not-performance-art>.
- [30] Pensky, "Natural History," 231.
- [31] Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 118.
- [32] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on The Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2009).
- [33] Horkheimer and Adorno quoted in David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, *Before the Voice of Reason: Echoes of Responsibility in Merleau-Ponty's Ecology and Levinas's Ethics*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 91.
- [34] Such an inversion, however, does have echoes in the history of visual culture – see, for example, *Andrea Alciato, A Book of Emblems: The Liber Emblemata In Latin and English* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004), 219. In this woodcut from Andrea Alciato's 16th Century Book of Emblems depicts a fox, entering a theatre director's store, taking up a theatre mask in her paws and exclaiming in the accompanying epigram "Oh, what a head is this! - But it has no brain!". What seems distinct in the choice of a fox as the carrier of moral message "mind, not outward form, prevails" (among its many other allegorical associations) is that the fox's elongated snout will not fit the mask.
- [35] Radioactive pollution has insidious effects on the equilibrium between the rate of genetic mutations in organisms and the rate that natural selection can reproduce beneficial mutations, without which the natural system breaks down. Its effects span time-scales outside of the human experiential frame.
- [36] "Pierre Huyghe: Untitled (Human Mask)," Guggenheim Bilbao, accessed July 1, 2019, <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/exhibitions/pierre-huyghe-untitled-human-mask>
- [37] Flodin, "Adorno on Hölderlin," 7-8.
- [38] Adorno "Natural History," 118.

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