Soma, Simulacra, Situation – Reflections on the Living in *UUmwelt* by Pierre Huyghe, author: Charlotte Desaga

Lecture for „Natur als Argument", Kunstverein Bamberg, 2019

If we wish to learn something essential about nature—its very being as vitality—then visual art offers an inexhaustible resource, far more than modern science, which typically avoids the question of nature's essence. The interplay between nature and artistic expression reveals much about humanity's place in the world, and how it perceives its surroundings. This surrounding world—what we call "environment"—can only be understood through the consciousness of living beings.

This is the focus of Pierre Huyghe's work, in which he explores the environments of different forms of existence. He calls these various worlds *UUmwelten*—with two capital U's. And indeed, they are many.

Born in Paris in 1961, Huyghe often addresses the conditions, possibilities, and limitations of cultural, biological, and institutional systems. He creates evolving settings that often unfold in real time during exhibitions.

Nature and environment are not synonyms, but in Huyghe's work, they are intrinsically linked. In this constellation, life itself exists in multiple causal relationships with both its surrounding world and with time—each shaped by specific modes of consciousness. With this in mind, let us turn to his spatial installation *UUmwelt*.

First exhibited in 2018, *UUmwelt* comprises several elements dispersed across multiple gallery spaces, each becoming an element in its own right. We encounter live flies roaming freely, a wall partially sanded down to reveal hidden layers of paint, the dust left behind on the floor, and—most prominently—five sequences of individual images displayed on monumental LED screens. [Images A, B, C, D, E]

The Core: Visualizing the Mental

The central focus lies on the image sequences generated through a software-driven transfer process using human data. A test subject was shown a selection of images and object descriptions. While mentally visualizing these, their brain activity was recorded via fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging). The recorded data was then processed by an artificial neural network that attempted to reconstruct the visual impressions using its own image database.

This experimental method, known as *Deep Image Reconstruction*, aims to correlate recorded neural activity with the hierarchical features of a trained network in order to recreate input images. Notably, the original images are not disclosed at any point in the exhibition.

These correlations between brain activity and database images form five individual image sequences, shown on large rotating LED panels. Their display patterns and playback speeds are governed by algorithms responsive to environmental data such as room temperature and

light. In two sequences, a minimal electronic soundscape adds a cool, technological atmosphere.

On-screen, we see rapid visualizations of processes: mental images translated by a computer's neural network. The program quickly scans and correlates images from its database with brainwave data, using a method that remains partly opaque. The five image sequences share visual similarities—central dense areas with unidentifiable objects, surrounded by rapidly shifting, organic yet strangely mechanical forms, mostly in earthy tones. [Videoclips A, B, C]

Material Memory and Biological Traces

The sanded wall is located in London's Serpentine Gallery, a space used for exhibitions since the 1970s. Its end wall has been artistically sanded in patches, revealing a map-like topography. Closer inspection reveals a relief formed by varying layers of paint—each a historical trace of previous exhibitions, like the rings in a tree trunk. [Images F, G]

The dust from the sanding remains untouched on the floor beneath. Visitors carry it unknowingly through the gallery, integrating it into the evolving exhibition.

Throughout the space, a mass of living flies comes and goes. [Images H, I] They are provided with food, fly freely, reproduce, and die. Their dead bodies accumulate on the floors. The flies embody life not only through their motion but also by marking the end of life. Feeding on decay, they accelerate decomposition and, like phoenixes, endure the harshest environments. Many fly species spend their larval stage in rot—meat, excrement, decaying matter.

The sanded wall, the dust, and the flies each embody a form of time. Through the presence of living beings, these elements attain new dimensions of reality. Everything—wall, dust, insects, and the digitally generated image flows—is caught in active processes or reveals a stage of becoming. Each of these processes highlights the transitory nature of the world and the distinct relationships to time they imply.

The wall becomes a literal image carrier, visualizing the exhibition history of the site as spatial time-layers. [Image J] The dust is pulverized time—the history of the wall's function as background to art, now ground into presence. [Image K] The flies illustrate the cycles of life and death in compressed timeframes. [Image L]

The insects are drawn to the warmth of the LED screens, clustering on their surfaces, almost magnetically. It prompts the question: who—or what—is their Beelzebub (Hebrew *Ba'al Zevuv*, "Lord of the Flies")? The images seem to lure the insects with promises of life, yet remain artificial, unconsumable. The flies, hungry but unsatisfied, become ghostly symbols of vitality within a high-tech system. Their biological lives contrast sharply with the data-driven world of machine imagery. Their fleeting lifespan—often just a single day—makes the boundaries of living time strikingly visible.

[Image M] These monumental sequences, derived from real human thought, processed by machines, become collaborative productions between human and artificial intelligence. But what do they show?

They offer organic-mechanical hybrids—flickering, ghost-like, ungraspable. Their interest fades quickly, as the images resist traditional categorization. Only through imaginative effort can we relate them to known entities. They are, as it were, images of thought-clouds, of fleeting consciousness. Their unformed outlines hint at shape, but remain incomplete.

Images Before Thought

Their inaccessibility evokes the monolith from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*—a cryptic embodiment of metaphysical transition. Like the monolith, these image sequences are sealed, closed off. They resemble unborn thoughts, visualized by AI—mystical and nearly ineffable. [Images O, P, Q]

This haunting impression is essential to the work. The title *UUmwelt* can be read as a clue, especially when referencing the Umwelt-theory of biologist and philosopher Jakob von Uexküll.

Uexküll describes the "Umwelt" as the narrow sliver of reality perceivable by a given organism—distinct from the larger "environment." Each living subject believes its Umwelt is the full reality, but in truth, each lives in a subjective world.

Seen this way, *UUmwelt* dramatically exposes the illusory nature of our own human Umwelt. It's relativized by the juxtaposition of insect reality, machine reality, and the altered physical materials of the gallery. The work portrays the isolation of existences and their disconnected environments. Being is always separate from other forms of being. Knowledge splits into many worlds.

The doubled "U" in *UUmwelt* acts like a typographic stutter—like pressing a key too fast. It symbolizes a multiplication of realities. Together, the assembled elements generate a whirlpool of overlapping times, spaces, and ways of knowing.

Temporal Entanglements

Living systems are woven from interrelations—"a web that stretches and supports their existence," as Uexküll says. The flies interact with the space: they feed, mate, die. Visitors change the air, heat, and humidity. But all these interactions unfold in different temporal frameworks.

Thus, the relationship between time and Umwelt is central in *UUmwelt*. All elements are part of time-based, situational processes. Human consciousness appears as a temporal sequence in the image streams. The room's time is inscribed in its walls and dust. The dust even seems to acquire a temporal agency—it drifts, clings to shoes, spreads—an embodied "dust-consciousness"?

The flies' time is observable in their short life cycles. Even their corpses bear witness to this temporal logic. But according to Uexküll, organisms don't just experience time—they generate their own time within their Umwelt. "Without a living subject," he writes, "there can

be no time." Time is not universal—it's individual. A fly's one-minute flight is half a lifetime; for us, it's an instant.

Image as Situation

UUmwelt oscillates between life and death, organism and environment, different intelligences, perception and imagination. In recycling originally human thoughts, the sequences become fragile traces—structures incomprehensible in a collaborative process between man and machine.

The sensory systems—whether biological or technological—filter input and reshape it. The artwork actively configures a flow of images, each one a time-based process. In Huyghe's words: *"An image is a situation. That's how I understand images—not photographically. A situation is an image."* This also applies to the mental images of human thought. These are processes too, generating simulacra—reflections? illusions?—from previous impressions.

Whether the reconstructed mental images reveal underlying cognitive frameworks isn't the point. The idea that they *could* is fascinating enough. Observing what cannot be observed— what cannot even be consciously imagined—is utterly compelling. We seem to glimpse the prefiguration of thought as image!

Can simulacra reveal something not visible in the object itself? Roland Barthes writes: *"Structure is in truth only a simulacrum of the object, an 'interested' simulacrum, since the imitated object reveals something hidden or unintelligible in the natural object."*

These shape-chimeras—layered fragments endlessly blending—convey this idea. Despite their rawness, they suggest an underlying visual logic. They defy verbal description, showing something we can imagine but not know—something outside consciousness.

Thus, Huyghe shows us a new form of image, capturing the moment *before* thought takes shape—impossible to align with so-called reality. The viewer completes the image in their imagination. They become part of the artwork, embedded in its web of interrelations.

What Does *UUmwelt* Reveal About the Living?

The Latin *natura*, like the Greek *physis*, originally meant generating, growing, being born. In *UUmwelt*, this principle of birth—of ideas, exhibitions, flies—is temporally captured and embedded in multiple modes of Umwelt-experience.

In this work, environmental experience itself becomes a natural phenomenon. Hierarchical distinctions between beings seem to dissolve. Uexküll's Umwelt theory supports this: every lifeform builds its own world and its own time. In *UUmwelt*, they converge—briefly, strangely, beautifully.