

PIERRE HUYGHE

Parkett 66 – 2003

TRAVELERS' TALES

JEREMY MILLAR

... make something which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is nonstable...
... make something indeterminate, which always looks different, the shape of which cannot be predicted precisely...
... make something which cannot 'perform' without the assistance of its environment...
... make something which reacts to light and temperature changes, is subject to air currents and depends, in its functioning, on the forces of gravity...
... make something which the 'spectator' handles, with which he plays and thus animates...
... make something which lives in time and makes the 'spectator' experience time...
... articulate something Natural...
- Hans Haacke, Cologne, January 1965¹⁾

to think is to voyage...
- Deleuze and Guattari²⁾

It is the block of cold one first notices, turning to begin the walk up smooth concrete steps, the cold and the sound of water and the smell of pine. One arrives on the first floor in some sense transformed or rather one's senses have been transformed. It is dark. The floor has been raised slightly and consists, now, of fragrant timber which runs across the wide open space. Squares have been removed from the ceiling grid, these shapes appearing in the mitred floor below. In the middle of one square sits a cone of snow and occasionally, if one waits, a small flurry falls from the opening above. Elsewhere, the sound of falling water announces a shower of rain within another square, or there is the hiss of mist falling, tumbling, and spreading. A single light moves above the ceiling grid, illuminating squares as if some accelerated calendar-like display; a short-wave radio moves between

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static and voices and sounds; and in the center of the room, a boat, made entirely of ice melts away slowly.

The floor above is dark also, although a faint red glow drifts down the approaching stairs. Music rolls down and one recognizes one of Satie's *Gymnopédies*, albeit orchestrated by Debussy. On the floor in the middle of the empty room is a white box, low and wide like a small platform; another box, identical to the first, floats a few feet above it. Smoke curls and whirls between them, like some elegant performance, lit by the many colored lights angled within the upper box: red, white, yellow, no yellow, then yellow again, orange-red and purple, red and purple only, then yellow once more, slow and simple and beautiful, like some Post-Impressionist synaesthesia. Some minutes later, as the music comes to its end, the small spotlights beam red and white, the main gallery lights come up and there, high and to the west, a warm orange glow radiates.

The final floor is brightly-lit, this time; there is music once more, yet it is difficult to distinguish at



PIERRE HUYGHE, L'EXPÉDITION SCINTILLANTE, ACT 1, UNTITLED (ICE BOAT, WEATHER SCORE, OFFSHORE RADIO), exhibition view, "L'Expédition Scintillante, a Musical," Kunsthau Bregenz, September 2002; ice, rain, fog, snow, "Radio Music" by John Cage; boat $8\frac{1}{2} \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times 19\frac{11}{16}$ ' / Eis, Regen, Nebel, Schnee, «Radio Music» von John Cage, Schiffsmasse 2,6 x 2 x 6 m. (PHOTO: MARKUS TRETTER, KUNSTHAUS BREGENZ)





Pierre Huyghe

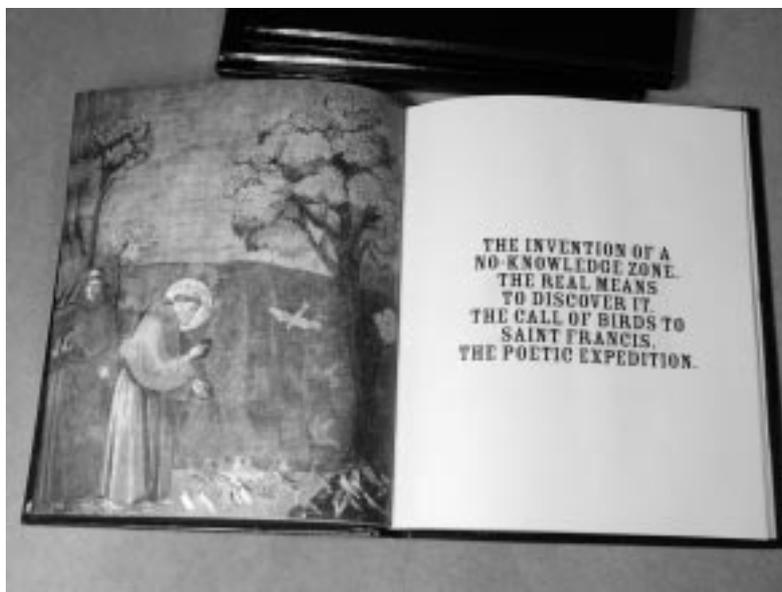
PIERRE HUYGHE, L'EXPÉDITION SCINTILLANTE, ACT 1, UNTITLED (ICE BOAT, WEATHER SCORE, OFFSHORE RADIO),
exhibition view, "L'Expédition Scintillante, a Musical," Kunsthaus Bregenz, September 2002; melting ice boat, rain, fog, snow,
"Radio Music" by John Cage; boat 8½ x 19^{11/16}' / schmelzendes Eisschiff, Regen, Nebel, Schnee, "Radio Music" von John
Cage, Schiffsmasse 2,6 x 2 x 6 m. (PHOTO: MARKUS TRETTER, KUNSTHAUS BREGENZ)



PIERRE HUYGHE, L'EXPÉDITION SCINTILLANTE, ACT 2, UNTITLED (LIGHT BOX), light show, installation view, Kunsthhaus Bregenz, September 2002, 6½ x 6¼ x 5¼' / Lichtspiel, 2 x 1,9 x 1,55 m. (PHOTO: MARKUS TRETTER, KUNSTHAUS BREGENZ)

PIERRE HUYGHE, *L'EXPÉDITION SCINTILLANTE*, ACT 3, UNTITLED
(PROGRAM BOOKLET), 2002, detail /
Programmbuch zur Ausstellung.

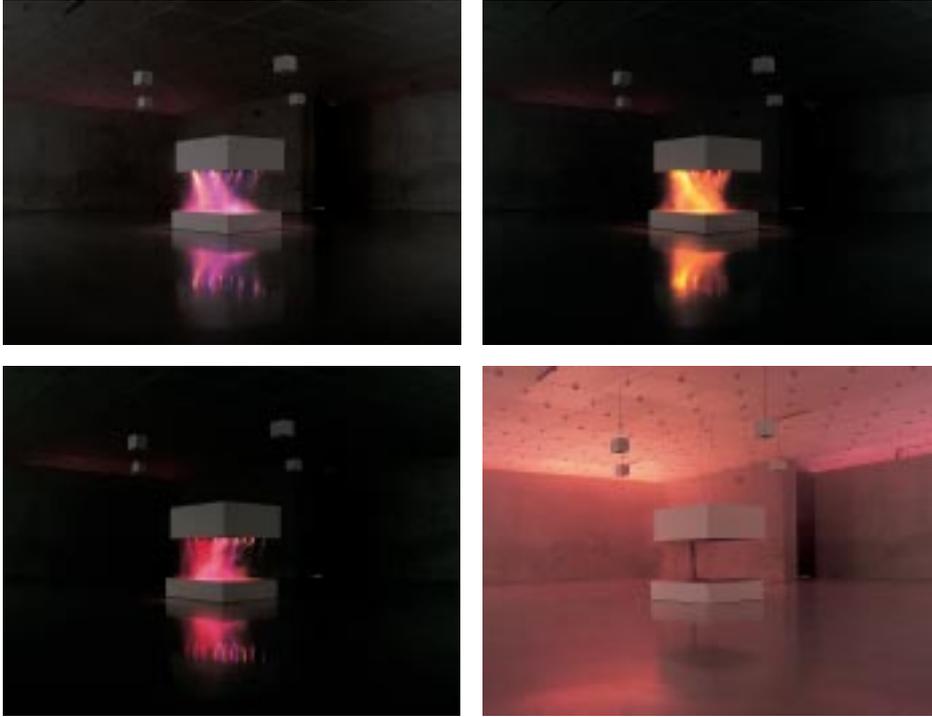
(PHOTO: PIERRE HUYGHE)



first. A large poster is placed on the wall near the entrance, showing a polar landscape upon which are scribbled black and white lines, and the text, in white: “L’expédition scintillante—a musical.” Long black leather benches are placed around the edges of the room and between them, in the middle of the room, a low black form, quite large, is defined by its black wooden surround. The music is early Brian Eno, a later form of the *Furniture Music* developed by Satie. Moving closer, the black surface is ice and although it has been recently polished, one can still see the traces made upon its surface by ice-skate blades, swirls and loops like those made by the trajectories of subatomic particles. On the wooden surround is a small white book with a hard, shiny white cover (there are one or two others lying on the benches). Printed on the front are some small penguins. I sit down, and open the book.

The title of the book is printed in white, just as it is printed on the poster. A black-and-white reproduction of Giotto’s fresco of ST. FRANCIS’ SERMON TO THE BIRDS (1297–99) is placed opposite the title “Prologue” and then on the overleaf once more, and followed by the statements: “The invention of a no-knowledge zone. The real means to discover it. The

call of birds to St. Francis. The poetic expedition.” Some small images of the pirate radio ship, Caroline, a mountain range, possibly Antarctic, and then Act I: “Six or seven persons. A radio boat navigating outside territorial waters. The quest of a nameless place in Polar Regions. A radio ship’s log in the shape of a musical etude. Edgar Allan Poe’s climatic score. Romantic weather. The change of seasons. The calypso.” Some more images of pirate radio ships, Friedrich’s ice-bound wreck, and then the title page of the first French edition of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Aventures d’Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), translated by Charles Baudelaire. The preface (or rather an extract) follows in French, signed by Pym, and relates how he was persuaded by the young Poe, then editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, to allow the author to write up his extraordinary adventures and present them in the journal “sous le manteau de la fiction,” under the garb of fiction. We then move to the final chapter of the book where the narrator refers to “la mort récente de M. Pym” and the terrible fact of the loss of the final two or three chapters of the narrative through the terrible accident which claimed their author also. So, while we know that Pym returned to America after his adventures, we cannot be sure how



PIERRE HUYGHE, *L'EXPÉDITION SCINTILLANTE, ACT 2, UNTITLED (LIGHT BOX)*, light show views, Kunsthau Bregenz, September 2002, 6½ x 6¼ x 5⅛' / Lichspiel, 2 x 1,9 x 1,55 m.
(PHOTO: MARKUS TRETTER, KUNSTHAUS BREGENZ)

he managed this feat, or how he met his final demise (and we would be no further enlightened were we to read the entire book, rather than these short extracts). Pym's narrative is left unfinished, which of course allows others to continue the story.

In a sense, this is what Poe himself did: he continued a story by borrowing heavily upon the improbable theories of John Cleves Symmes, who believed the earth was hollow and open at the poles, and the contemporaneous exposition (or satire) of these theories in *Symzonia—A Voyage of Discovery* (1820) by Captain "Adam Seaborn." No doubt the vision of Symzonia as a perfect utopia of perfect reason, and one reserved for perfect whites also appealed to Poe, amidst the tension of 1830s Virginia, as he too used the white polar expanses in order to play out his own lurid fantasies of paranoia and race-war in a place far removed from his adopted homeland. The title page of the actual sequel, Jules Verne's *Le Sphinx des Glaces* (1897) follows in the small book in my hand, with a couple of its pages. Poe's fascination with nature is replaced with Verne's fascination with

machines, and the sublime becomes technological. As I sit, my mind begins to wander. I turn the pages in the book: "Act II... A musical box. A concert for penguins. A psychedelic [sic] experience. A night rainbow..." A still from the mother ship sequence in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977); an Antarctic scene with penguins, twice; "General Principles in Place Naming" with regard to Antarctic features; and "Act III... The documentary that became a musical tale. The musical event. The program on ice..." These are tales of travel and tales that have traveled, the acts in the book referring to the floors in the building, and the passage from journey, to experience, to the representation of that experience. Yet this exhibition is no record of an expedition that has already taken place, but rather a scenario for a collective expedition yet to come, a poetic expedition rather than a scientific one, and one that can be joined by anyone at any point.

There is always a strong sense of performance within tales, the sense that they exist, somehow, only in their telling and this is something of which

Huyghe is undoubtedly aware. While considering this exhibition, and the book which is a part of it, one cannot help but ask why there is no great Polar art, although one can refer to literature and music inspired by these extraordinary places. The art created in these regions is afflicted by a certain literalness, a desire to document scenes accurately while lacking the means to do so. There are the technical difficulties of making pictures in conditions where gloves must be worn at all times, where paint freezes, and where cameras may be rendered useless by too much—or too little—light, yet I would suggest that the conceptual problems are greater. In the Antarctic, particularly the interior, the conventions of representational landscape art fall apart: the use of perspective to create a convincing three-dimensional space becomes impossible in the surrounding emptiness; the perception of space is full of hazards, and distances shift, often with dangerous consequences; the forms of landscape art are missing also, no color and no shape, or rather they are not recognized as such. Artists such as Frank Hurley and Edward Wilson found only what they were looking for, and for all their physical bravery, their work appears timid alongside the explorations being made by artists at the same time.

Huyghe has recognized that our relationship to a place such as Antarctica can only ever be abstract, and that fiction—rather than a misplaced documentary realism—might be the most appropriate form of engagement (perhaps in this way its difference is left intact). There is a literalness here, undoubtedly—the cold, the sound, the snow—yet they appear as elements within a story rather than as realistic representations, elements which can be reconfigured continuously. The ice boat is not just a means of travel to the territory, but part of that territory also; the radio playing John Cage brings to mind his own *Imaginary Landscapes*; the small spot-lit arena upon which Huyghe has created his own *aurora*, and which in Scotland was commonly referred to as the “merry dancers”; and the ice-rink and the illuminated mist suggesting the “multitude of colors” which appeared to Coleridge while skating in Germany, shortly after publishing *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, an allegorical narrative that describes a spiritual journey rather



GUSTAVE DORÉ, woodcut illustration for Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" / Buchillustration, Holzschnitt.

than a merely maritime one. Like Poe, Huyghe is able to present a certain degree of closure while allowing an immense and productive openness at its center, like a traveler into the unknown, prepared and yet desiring the unexpected. Perhaps, then, he understands one of the few things there is to understand about art: that our engagement with art is a form of movement, of travel, a journey across time and space towards something we consider the work of art, although that work only exists in our working towards it.³⁾

1) *Obra Social: Hans Haacke*, ex. cat., Spanish/English (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tapies, 1995), p. 312.

2) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia II*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988), p. 482.

3) This is something I explore further in my essay “Distance and Proximity” in *Graham Gussin* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2002).