

# Witness and presence in the work of Pierre Huyghe

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**Abstract** The relation between “presence” and “representation” is an age-old topic in the arts, but it is further complicated in our time of advanced media conditions. Pierre Huyghe is one artist who has consistently addressed questions of presence and representation throughout his artistic oeuvre, including the role of the witness within it. Considering the sophistication of Huyghe’s work with regard to the riddle of presence in the realm of contemporary means of representation, the artist’s work is taken as a case study for a broad range of artists exploring related topics within the arts and the media. This paper argues that art that interrogates the question of presence within the context of contemporary media culture—from Marina Abramović to Stelarc, Jeffrey Shaw to Julia Scher—asks for being interpreted through presence theories developed within the field of media studies in addition to methods of art theory and criticism. Accordingly, Huyghe’s work is productively related to one such theory, namely the YUTPA model by Caroline Nevejan, which theorizes the interrelated concepts of natural, mediated, and witnessed presence.

**Keywords** Pierre Huyghe · Contemporary art · Media · Presence · Representation

## 1 Preface

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “witness” as “the action or condition of being an observer of an event”.<sup>1</sup>

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What identifies the figure of the witness, according to this definition, is the (physical) presence of a person. Caroline Nevejan describes the related concept of “witnessed presence” in her dissertation, *Presence and the Design of Trust*, as “the attestation of witnessing the presence of others” (Nevejan 2007, p. 79). The act of witnessing and the fact of being witnessed are both temporally conditioned: they unfold in real time—in the “here and now.” Pierre Huyghe’s short video, *Two Minutes Out of Time* (2000) can be seen as a special case of witnessed presence because the observer does not see another human being in real time and space, but an animated Japanese Manga character with exaggerated physical features in cyberspace. AnnLee, as this feminine character with ultramarine blue hair, almond-shaped eyes, and Dr Spock-like ears is baptized, is an imaginary figure of which Huyghe and Philip Parreno bought the copyrights. Then, they made the character available to a group of befriended artists, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, who used her as an inspiration source for their own work in a variety of media. Huyghe also created a few works with AnnLee himself, such as the just-mentioned video, in which we witness this charming cyborg as she is reflecting upon her own digital presence and brief existence: “I have 2 min”, she warns her witnessing spectators, “in 2 min I’ll be away” (Fig. 1).

Huyghe’s animation challenges the concepts of witness and presence as described in the opening paragraph. The artist does everything to bring AnnLee “to life”—providing her with recognizable human emotions and a keen intellect—but the question remains whether the term “presence,” in the classic, ontological sense, can be used

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary online, s.v. “witness”. Accessed on 15 March 2011.