

AMELIA DOUGLAS

A Forest of Lines: An Interview with Pierre Huyghe



Pierre Huyghe, *A Forest of Lines*, event, Sydney Opera House, 2008. Photo credit: Paul Green. Courtesy Pierre Huyghe and Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris and New York.

Amelia Douglas: For the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, you constructed a temporary forest of a thousand trees, real trees, inside the concert hall at the Sydney Opera House.¹ A song was sung in the forest, and the audience was invited to walk through this space filled with mist, through paths in the trees, to listen to a story. First, why did you want to use the Opera House in particular for this work?

Pierre Huyghe: I was looking for a place of representation. When you think about theatre, spectacle, opera, you think about this place and this iconic building.

AD: So it's like a beacon for projected narratives. We might even say the building is kind of 'sacred'.

PH: Yes, so a bit of irreverence is needed. I was invited to Sydney to do a project and it is important that there is a correspondence between the work and the context, the environment. But the main reason was that the Opera House is a time-based platform for representation. So within this place of representation there is an environment that has been transplanted, and that this environment happens to be a forest.

AD: You say it happens to be a forest – do you think it could have been something else? What does the idea of a forest mean to you in particular?

¹ My thanks to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, artistic director of 'Revolutions: Forms That Turn', 16th Biennale of Sydney, 2008, and to Pierre Huyghe.

PH: The forest or a jungle is something you can't easily define. It is a blurry image, because it's a multitude, heterogeneous and complex that keeps changing. It is an organism. It is a place where you can lose yourself, so it has mystery.

AD: What about the mythic elements, like the forest as the space where the witch lives, the set for fairytales ...

PH: The forest is a place of fiction and tales, it is a place of fear, where things happen that you don't see and you don't know about. The *Forest of Lines* is a science fiction experiment in a way.

When you enter inside the Opera House you encounter an image. You are standing at the top of the space; you are looking down at a canopy covered with mist where the light is like dawn. You are above a valley obscured by clouds. There is a state of calm and confusion at the same time. This blurry image is made of a maze of paths. As you come down the paths, through the maze of trees, you enter the mist and you start to get lost in the forest that seems to have grown over night and still growing ...

AD: Like it might take over the building?

PH: Yes, the separation between the stage, the auditorium, the space where the audiences moves, the stalls, the circles – these elements have been erased by this growing organism. So the spatial and social protocol usually associated with this space is gone. Here, you can walk in any kind of direction, choose the path that you want to take through the image.

AD: But we might say that there were still sort of navigation points within the image where behaviour was coded by the apparatus. I spoke to a group who said they'd been kicked out for having left the path. (I actually suspected you might quite like people going off the path but maybe you could say something about that). So it was not possible to go all over the forest, or to walk anywhere you liked. I did, however, love that some people were using the environment a bit like a park – even setting up a picnic under the trees! Also – and I think this is important – when you are in this forest, you are always reminded of where you are. This is not a space of total illusion or fantasy. It is not intended to be an entirely immersive environment.

PH: No it is not. This is not a set, it has to be understood as a displacement, it is real and at scale with the place, so you can still see where you are by looking at the architecture. The architecture is helping you – you might recognise the organ or the seating arrangements, or maybe you have the memory of the space if you have been there before. But there is still a potential to get a little bit lost in this space.

AD: And then while you are in the forest, too, you are always hearing this voice coming through the trees. What is the role of the song in the piece? The UK singer Laura Marling wrote it especially for this performance, yes?

PH: Yes, she wrote the melody. The lyrics are literally indications how to get outside the Opera House and go elsewhere. The lyrics start: *Turn your back on the forest of lines, leave the Opera House behind*, then pass the bridge, past Luna Park and take the 1 and A1... It's an oral map that the narrator delivers. She is first a narrator, and then it happens that this narrator delivers this oral map through a song. It is a real map that you can follow, now, tomorrow, or in five years time when someone hears the narrator or remember the lyrics, the map will lead to the place where this image, this information, came from. The event lasts twenty-four hours, it is an information that appear for a brief moment, a fragment of reality that appears and then disappears. It is a fragile apparition of an image of an environment in a space of representation. It shows a 'fact' in the way the news on television shows an information that pop up and vanishes but here the difference is there is no mediation, it is a direct experience. We need to understand that this is an image that has a brief life, a short temporality. There

is no permanence. It is just something that appears in the space of representation to say: I am going to go.

AD: And also something that tells you that you should go, you should leave!

PH: As if in an emergency state before a catastrophic moment. It says I'm going to disappear and you should leave before that happens, and face something else.

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AD: Is this a little bit like saying the spectacle of the work is a decoy?

PH: What's a decoy mean?

AD: Well, a decoy is like a trick, a distraction. Not a trick exactly: more like a lure that diverts. Say, for example, you go into a room, and put something shiny on a table, and then maybe you invite a lot of people into the room and they are all looking at the shiny object, but really the most important element is not what is on the table, maybe it is outside, out the window, maybe it is somewhere else, you know?

PH: Yes, that is right. It has to do with magic tricks. It is a decoy.

The spectacle is a format and here through the performance it is a vehicle. There are few words attached to this notion of spectacle. There is entertainment – and the word entertain is to maintain and in French we also say a *divertissement*, which comes from to divert. And then there is the idea of attraction. I like to think of spectacle as a diversion not from something else but as a starting point, as a movement. I am trying to allow a shift to happen, to produce a displacement, that's when magic tricks really work. And that shift has to evolve between a reality and its invention. This place is an oblique mirror, if you face the mirror you see elsewhere. The song, the narration, goes *around* the object and the image, which is the forest. This image needs to be fragile, to be able to hear the narration around this image. The disappearance of this image becomes a narration, an interpretation, right?

AD: So the narration circles the image/object (or forest) while it is in a certain place and time, the Opera House for example – the narration conceptually and physically goes around the image before the image disappears, and we are left with a diffusion? I wonder if you could say how this relates to another idea you've been talking about for a while, which is the difference between the idea of exposition versus show.

PH: A show is an exhibition that has become an image. Here, in the place of representation, it is very difficult to say that *A Forest of Lines* is not a show, still I'm trying to make a diversion through the language. So the audience ...

AD: The audience also becomes the show.

PH: The audience is part of the image, part of the show. A lot of lights are moving in the forest ...

AD: Yes, you can see the lights from the headlamps that the audience are wearing, like caving lights glittering between the trees, making lines in the fog ...

PH: The movements of the people looking for their way to outside the place of representation are becoming the exhibition.

AD: The movement becomes a pattern.

PH: Exactly. But it's also ...

AD: From the top, it looked like a search party, like they were looking for something that was lost.

PH: Until they hear the narrator and follow the narration that tells you how to get out of the image.

AD: That's great. This process also seems to me to be very similar to your process of making art. Maybe at the beginning you start with a blurry image, you cannot picture it fully, it's full of fog but you go in anyway. Perhaps you find something to guide you but there is always something else that you will end up going towards after that,

and then you have to find your way out again. In order to be able to escape from the image you have to understand where the image comes from. You have to understand where it is placed – in a time, in a history, in a space, at a moment, within a context, for 24 hours, or whatever. And maybe that is another reason why this experience was accessible for only one day? Was it always going to be one day?

PH: Yes, the placement in the present is very important, the where and the when.

AD: How is this work different from, say for example, the performance for the Antarctica project *A Journey that Wasn't* (2005) in Central Park in New York? So in that project, you were making equivalences between places and forms and you were also working with sound and narrative. You undertook a journey to Antarctica, mapped the form of the island that you found there, and then performed the shape of the island as a musical performance on an ice rink in New York. And that process was about finding equivalences. But this work is not so much about finding equivalences ... what is it like?

PH: A translation perhaps ...

AD: Maybe it is more like: this forest is not what it is.

PH: Yes, and it's not a forest that has been. It is not precisely a displacement. Still, it is an image of a forest and what happens before the image is produced determines the image of the forest. The song is a map for a journey towards what constitutes the image. It is a line following a chain of events in the life of an environment. It's a context that I have translated.

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AD: As I understand it, the lyric-narration you wrote traces a specific path, one that begins with the Opera House and leads north. Could you tell me where it is that we might end up at the end of this story? Where are the trees that 'eat people whole' that are sung about in the forest? Where does that line come from?

PH: I went to the Daintree Rainforest with a woman called Prudence. As we walked in the oldest rainforest on Earth, she told me a story. When Captain Cook discovered land on the north coast of Australia, he enter the forest and saw these trees called Strangler trees because they strangle others trees until they die, leaving a hole in the centre. The Aboriginal put their dead in these hollow trees. When Captain Cook arrived and saw human remains inside trees, he believed that these trees could eat people.

AD: So this is why, at the end of the song, there is a suggestion that we might 'ask Prudence' how it all began? We are taken to the point that the story was told to you. And this is a real story?

PH: It's a real story written by Cook in his diaries, it is now a myth that comes from a mistake by Cook. So in *A Forest of Lines* you start at the Opera House, followed by the forest and if you keep with the narrative you end up with a person inside a tree. The song line ends with another story, an inside out. The structure of someone singing an oral map comes from an Australian Aboriginal tradition, it is a description of landscape and of a dreaming. It is a way to tell people about their environment and also a way to find yourself in it. The landscape is the narrative ...

AD: And the story is the landscape.

PH: Yes, so once you have this idea that your environment is a narrative, you can travel from one point of the narrative to another point of the narrative, through the oral map. It's a personal GPS but you find your way through singing. It's a relation of space, narration and time; it's really a mind-blowing structure.

AD: And so before you began this project you went out, into the desert ...

PH: I went to Uluru.

AD: But this is also a mechanism that you have had in your work outside of this Australian context for a long time ...

PH: Yes, I found in the songlines a previous concern: how to translate time into space or temporalised space. I am trying to find an *ecology*, a movement between a subject and their representation; between an image and its environment. A non-mediated relation with the image.

AD: Is this also a relation that is also inside, as in ontological? The reality, the image, the environment, the narration – they are all inter-related. But can we also think of Deleuze's notion of difference ...

PH: Yes. And not only about their given relation but their potential ones.

AD: For Deleuze, difference is a state of being ... so I'm wondering if there is a symmetry between the movement that you make on the outside, in your projects, and something that happens on the inside, like an internal mechanism for the spectator? I'm not sure if I'm making myself clear.

PH: I am trying to stand in the moment of transition and of translation, to understand how that process works and to produce a movement. I am trying to open a space of discursivity and experience, a space of potential interpretations.

AD: And perhaps also open up literal space, because if you go to the end of the journey then ...

PH: If you make the journey, the work starts to exist. For the moment, no one has experienced it. People have seen the prologue, walked through its score. An exhibition is not the end of a process. It is a 'mise en route', as with *The Association of Freed Time*. *A Forest of Lines* is an opening for something else.

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AD: Would you consider publishing the lyrics or do you want them to remain as memories?

PH: I could consider publishing them.

AD: Really? I was interested in the idea that people would have to remember the directions, and then maybe they would forget some sections and get lost and end up somewhere not where you intended ...

PH: Oh yeah, so it would be like, no, she said right at the bridge!

AD: I thought she said left!

PH: And then maybe they end up some place in the middle of nowhere. But no, I don't mind if they are published.

AD: I was also wondering, is the piece very similar to how you thought it was going to be originally?

PH: It changes, but from the moment I had this image of an organism that grew – a kind of post-apocalyptic image of an organism that was growing slowly and filling this place – it is mostly the same. After you have details in the making, which are always interesting.

AD: How does the folk music fit in?

PH: Folk music is mainly narrative music. Folk songs usually have their origins in real stories, told in a simple ways.

AD: And the title?

PH: The forest reminded me of Baudelaire ...

AD: Wasn't he writing about language as a forest of signs?

PH: It is *Correspondences* in *The Flowers of Evil*. He is writing *Man passes through forests of symbols*. It is a dialogue between fragments of heterogenous states, a bridge between a world of sensations and a world of ideas. *A Forest of Lines* is a translation, an image you escape through language.

AD: It's not a metaphor though.

PH: No, I actually think it is literal.

AD: You originally intended to call the work *The Valley Obscured by Clouds*. That's a film title, isn't it?

PH: Yes, *The Valley Obscured by Clouds* was the American title for *La Vallée* (1972) by Barbet Schroeder. It's a great film with the music of Pink Floyd. I initially used it as the working title of the previous idea.

AD: What about this idea of multiple voices all narrating the same story? I believe you had eight different vocalists singing in shifts over the course of the event. Was it important to you that it wasn't just one narrator?

PH: No, that doesn't matter so much. It was mainly for practical reasons. However, I do like that the narration became a cover of a song. It's another level of interpretation and translation.

AD: And it was a different interpretation by every singer – although I'm not sure that was your intention.

PH: In the end, it's not so much about the person. The person is a vehicle.

AD: This is interesting. We could say, for example, that the agency of the spectators in the Opera House was related to finding their way through an image, to how they choose to move through the given paths, but the people who were actually narrating this story were vehicles, or vessels, in a similar way perhaps that Annlee was used as a container for other stories?

PH: Annlee was an empty shell. Here the narrator is the vehicle to find a path – both literally and conceptually. The song is actually a description of an artwork. It gives a sequence of information about how to get somewhere else. I thought about Lawrence Weiner's works, or even Kosuth's chair and the definition and image of the chair.

AD: I think the main difference here is that your purpose is not to make art about art.

PH: Absolutely not. I was just saying that I had thought about these things.

AD: I think that Kosuth had a lot to answer for in his insistence that art should act as a proposition about art. This intensified the idea that art had to be solely concerned with pushing the boundaries of the definition of art. To me, this can be a dead end because there are some amazing things outside of art that demand attention. It's like Pasolini said, 'I believe there is a reality to evoke and we are guilty if we fail to evoke it.'

PH: I agree with you. When I say that the work has to become an ecology that's exactly what I mean. In an organic system there is an exchange. It is because there is an exchange that an alteration can happen, and this movement leads to the production of difference. This is the opposite of a monument, something rigid. An organism breathes. The work changes, some people saw the event and others just heard about it. It is always a state, a moment in a movement, a process. It is not something that is determinate, a closed resolution. Maybe people will hear the lyrics, maybe they will meet this woman Prudence in the Daintree and she will tell them a story ... You know what I mean?

AD: I know what you mean. So it doesn't really matter if some people just came in and said, oh, it's very entertaining, it looks nice, ok, it's a forest, *voilà*, and then fifteen minutes later they're back to work?

PH: I don't think there is one interpretation or one way to grab something.

You still need an engagement, a desire or something that you want to share. What I am trying to do is to intensify the potentiality, the state of potentiality in a given space.

AD: If you want to preserve the space for potential, you need to maintain desire. This means that you can never reach a finite end point. It also might mean that you never

actually 'get' the thing you are looking for, the thing you desire, because that would mean stasis, or an endogenous state like the one you were speaking of before ...

PH: Yes and that's maybe where we get this feeling coming in, of melancholia.

AD: Absolutely, because as soon as desire is realised it is extinguished and knowing this makes for a certain kind of sadness. It's important not to confuse the object of desire with desire itself. This sometimes happens when the word desire gets caught up in conversations about capitalism or consumerism, when people talk about desire in relation to objects, for example. But desire is never in the object, and in order to maintain desire you need to defer its realisation, you need to make sure it doesn't get trapped inside something else. I think when you use the word desire about your work you mean it in a very specific way and you are really not talking about objects at all.

PH: No. Desire is a movement. Desire is related to the idea of freedom.

AD: Yes for me too. I picture it like a flickering sequence – we have desire, melancholy, desire, melancholy, and so on, off, on, off ...

PH: I guess *A Forest of Lines* exists in a vibrating movement between desire and melancholy.

AD: Like the pattern of a waveform, or a blinking signal.

Dr Amelia Douglas completed her Art History PhD on the work of Pierre Huyghe at the University of Melbourne in 2008.