

Analyse, evaluate and reflect about an artwork introduced in the class using critical theories related to the Anthropocene.



Untitled (Human Mask) (2014) by Pierre Huyghe

Interfacing with Non-Human Intelligences: Art, AI, and the Anthropocene

In this essay, I explore how contemporary art, AI, and ecological thinking can help us imagine forms of communication with non-human intelligences in the context of the Anthropocene. I have been particularly drawn to Pierre Huyghe's powerful work *Untitled (Human Mask)* (2014), which raises uncomfortable questions about how easily humans project meaning onto other species. British writer, artist, and technologist James Bridle describes intelligence as something distributed across animals, plants, and machines, while Brian Eno—visual artist, music producer, and activist—approaches technology as a creative partner rather than something humans should simply control. Alongside these artists, I draw on thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and Merlin Sheldrake, who develop ways of paying attention to non-human life that do not fit within a human-centred worldview.

My aim is to consider art as a meeting ground: a space where humans can experiment with different ways of noticing, interpreting, and responding to other forms of intelligence. I am also interested in the potential role of AI in helping us interface with, and explore, patterns or behaviours we might otherwise overlook. The guiding question here is: how can art, supported by ecological and technological thought, help us imagine a future in which meaningful communication with non-human intelligences becomes possible in the age of the Anthropocene?

The Anthropocene and More-Than-Human Thinking

The Anthropocene is a proposed geological epoch in which human activity has become the dominant force shaping the planet. First introduced by Crutzen and Stoermer (2000), the concept suggests that climate change, mass extinction, pollution, and ecological instability are not accidental side effects but consequences of human systems. Looking through the lens of the Anthropocene highlights the idea that

humans do not stand apart from nature, emphasising our deep entanglement with the Earth's processes and systems. It also demands a rethinking of responsibility, agency, and long-term action—particularly as existing modes of living are proving unsustainable and potentially disastrous.

More-than-human thinking expands on this by insisting that humans are just one part of a much larger network of relationships. Haraway (2016, p.20) argues that we must “stay with the trouble”—that is, remain inside ecological complexity rather than imagining ourselves above or outside it. Her idea of “making kin” encourages forming new relationships with other species based not on domination but on shared dependency. Tsing (2015, pp.19–22) similarly focuses on how life persists within damaged landscapes, emphasising the importance of “noticing” the plants, animals, fungi, and organisms that quietly shape environments even when they fall outside human categories. Together, Haraway and Tsing argue for a shift in perception: paying attention to other beings is not optional but necessary for understanding the world's interdependent systems.

Sheldrake's (2020) work on fungi pushes this further by challenging assumptions about what intelligence looks like. He describes fungal mycelium as a dynamic, interconnected network that distributes nutrients, shares information, and adapts to environmental change — without a centralised brain. Mycelium, he writes, is “a map of a fungus's recent history” and “ecological connective tissue ... the living seam by which much of the world is stitched into relation” (2020, p. 53). In other words, intelligence can be distributed, relational, and embodied in unexpected forms. Taken together, Haraway, Tsing, and Sheldrake encourage a move beyond human-centred thinking and towards a more careful, participatory attention to the more-than-human world.

Art as a Space for Encounter



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These ideas provide an important foundation for turning to creative practices, where the question of encountering non-human intelligence becomes tangible, unsettling, or emotionally charged. Art allows these complex ideas to be experienced holistically rather than simply understood. It offers a space where forms of attention can be tested, imagined, or rehearsed before they exist in practical terms.

Pierre Huyghe's *Untitled (Human Mask)* (2014) sits at the centre of this discussion. The film features a macaque monkey wearing a mask and costume, moving through an abandoned restaurant in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. The mask is a Noh mask, a classical form from Japanese theatre designed to erase individuality, producing a face that is neither fully human nor fully inhuman. Because Noh masks have fixed expressions—emptily serene, expressionless, or faintly uncanny—they refuse emotional transparency. When placed on a nonhuman animal, the mask becomes what critics call a “non-mask”: it no longer functions as a theatrical face but as a hollow signifier of humanity. It simulates personhood while revealing its absence. This intensifies the film's eeriness, creating a troubling ambiguity: the monkey

appears trapped in a human role it cannot understand, endlessly repeating gestures it has been trained to perform. The result is at once human-like and profoundly not human, inhabiting a liminal position where categories of species, agency, and identity blur.

The setting of Fukushima deepens this sense of estrangement. After the nuclear disaster, the region itself became a liminal space—neither fully abandoned nor fully inhabitable, suspended between contamination and recovery. It is a landscape marked by human presence yet emptied of everyday life, a threshold between past normality and an uncertain future. Huyghe’s film overlays this spatial liminality onto the monkey’s own species—liminality, producing what might be described as a “loop of the liminal.” The monkey wanders through a human-made disaster zone, performing human-coded actions (serving, cleaning, waiting) in a world from which humans themselves have withdrawn. It feels as though both monkey and landscape are caught in an endless temporal loop: a nonhuman performer acting out forgotten routines inside a human world rendered uninhabitable by human actions.

This “loop of the liminal” adds an even more stark and unsettling sense of disconnectedness to the film. We, humans, have created the disaster that emptied the space, yet the monkey—trained, masked, and displaced—seems condemned to inhabit it indefinitely. In Huyghe’s film, the macaque is not just inside a liminal zone; it is trapped in liminality itself, a haunting embodiment of the uncanny entanglements between humanity, nonhuman animals, and the damaged worlds we leave behind. The monkey’s gestures appear strangely human, but it quickly becomes clear that this familiarity comes from us, not from the animal.

Placed within the context of the Anthropocene, the work becomes an eerie commentary on how non-human lives are shaped—sometimes violently, almost always arrogantly—by human infrastructures. The empty, contaminated restaurant

becomes a landscape that the monkey must navigate despite having no role in creating it. This reflects the broader condition of many species whose worlds are structured by human systems they cannot understand. Huyghe's film reveals that attempts to communicate with non-human beings often begin from distorted assumptions, shaped by our desire to see ourselves reflected in other species.



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Intelligence Beyond the Human: Bridle, Eno, and Sheldrake

Questions raised by *Untitled (Human Mask)* connect directly to Bridle's argument that intelligence is not a uniquely human attribute but something spread across biological and technological systems. In *Ways of Being* (2022), Bridle shows how animals, plants, ecosystems, and machines all engage in forms of sensing, responding, and decision-making that challenge human definitions of intelligence. He argues that recognising these forms requires expanding our perceptual and conceptual frameworks—not simply looking harder but learning to look differently.

Eno's practice offers another route into this expanded understanding. His generative artworks and ambient compositions treat technology as a collaborator capable of producing outcomes too complex or unpredictable for human control. In *A Year with Swollen Appendices* (1996), he describes working with systems that evolve autonomously, creating patterns that he could not have invented alone. This repositions technology as a partner in intelligence rather than a tool—a shift that mirrors Sheldrake's account of distributed, non-centralised forms of knowing within fungal networks.

Taken together, Bridle, Eno, and Sheldrake help articulate why imagining communication with non-human intelligences is so challenging: humans often lack the sensory tools or conceptual frameworks to recognise unfamiliar forms of meaning. This is where AI becomes relevant—not as a futuristic sci-fi consciousness, but as a set of technologies able to detect, analyse, or model patterns beyond human perception. AI can map behaviours, chemical exchanges, or environmental signals that humans cannot directly sense. In this sense, AI becomes an interface or mediator rather than a translator: it does not “speak for” non-human beings but helps humans notice the rhythms and signals that shape their worlds.

Art as Prototype for Future Relations

Art becomes especially important here because it embraces ambiguity, speculation, and emotional resonance. Unlike scientific approaches that seek clarity, art allows encounters to remain liminal, open, and unfinished. Artists such as Huyghe, Bridle, and Eno use this openness to stage interactions between human and non-human agencies even when those relationships are unstable or incomplete. Art can therefore function as a prototype: it allows us to rehearse the experience of meeting another intelligence on unfamiliar terms.

Tsing's (2015) emphasis on "noticing" resonates strongly here, particularly her exploration of the matsutake mushroom and its multispecies collaborations. Her work encourages slow, careful attention to forms of life that do not announce themselves in human ways. Likewise, Haraway's (2016, p.20) call to "stay with the trouble" helps frame art's ability to hold discomfort rather than resolve it. By welcoming uncertainty, art trains us in the kinds of collaborative, flexible thinking that may one day shape communication with other species, environments, or technological systems, using AI as translator or interface.

In this essay, I have explored how contemporary art, AI, and ecological thought can help us imagine communication with non-human intelligences in the Anthropocene. Through Huyghe's unsettling exploration of human projection, Bridle's emphasis on distributed intelligence, Eno's generative systems, and Sheldrake's networked fungal life, a common theme emerges: intelligence is relational, situated, and not limited to human experience. The Anthropocene makes this recognition urgent, as human activity continues to reshape ecosystems that rely on diverse forms of agency. Art, together with emerging AI technologies, offers a way to develop new habits of attention and to experiment with modes of connection that may guide more sustainable and imaginative futures—futures that may even be steered directly by non-human intelligences themselves. Rather than providing definitive answers, these practices encourage humility and openness—qualities essential for any future in which humans hope to live responsibly alongside other intelligences.

Word Count (excluding references): 1694 words

AI Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT for proofreading and formatting on Sunday 30th November 2025

Illustrations

The three images are from *Untitled (Human Mask)* (2014) by Pierre Huyghe
<https://lesoeuvres.pinaultcollection.com/en/artwork/untitled-human-mask>

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Winter 2025