

ARTFORUM

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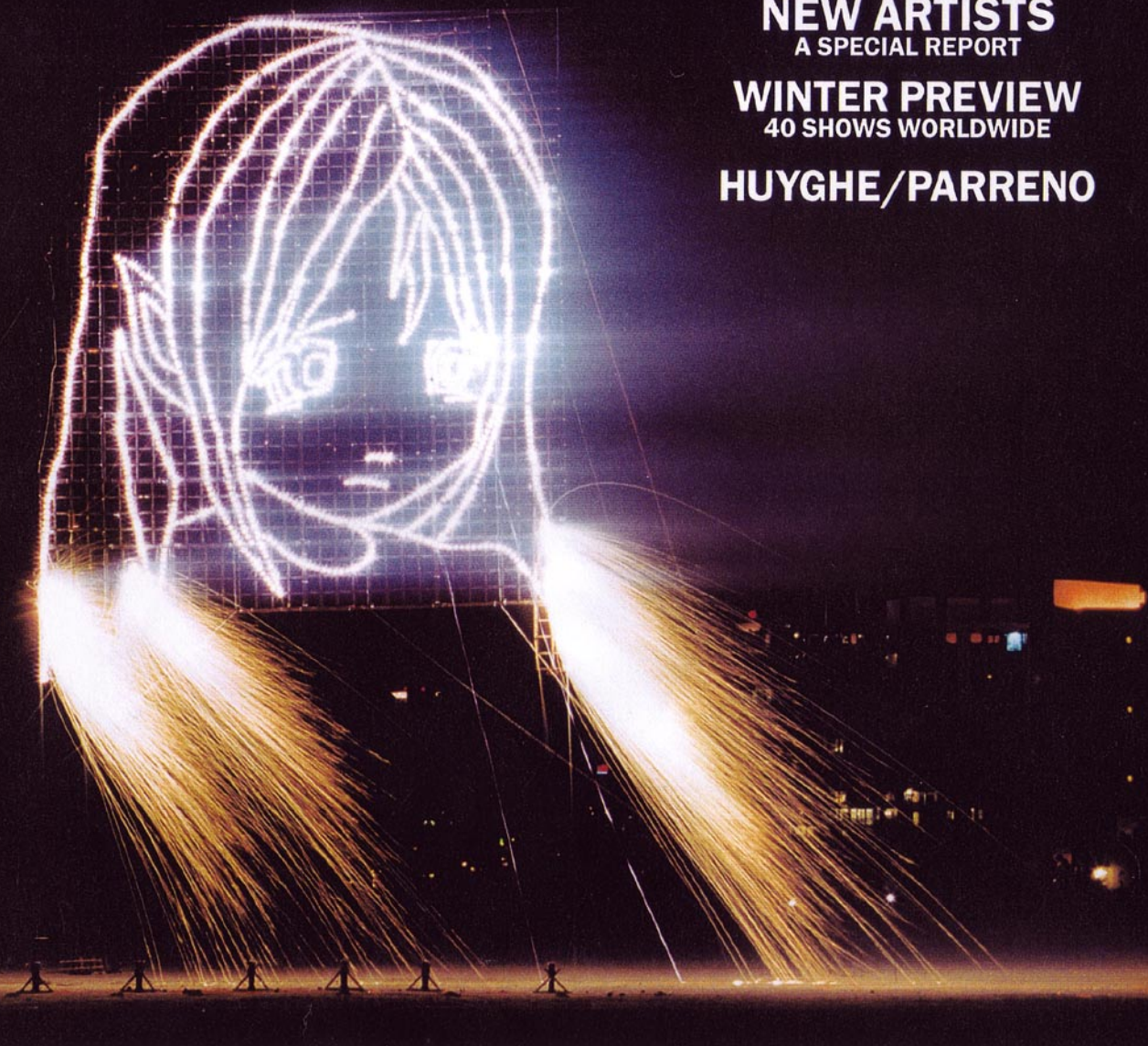
I N T E R N A T I O N A L



**NEW ART
NEW ARTISTS**
A SPECIAL REPORT

WINTER PREVIEW
40 SHOWS WORLDWIDE

HUYGHE/PARRENO



In 1999, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno purchased the rights to a manga drawing from a Japanese firm and called on a dozen artist friends to realize works based on that cartoon character, whom they named Annlee. The fruits of their communal effort were brought together for the first time in "No Ghost Just a Shell," a traveling exhibition that began its international tour at the Kunsthalle Zürich last year. Philip Nobel considers the venture, currently on view at both the Institute of Visual Culture, in Cambridge, England, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Pierre Huyghe, *One Million Kingdoms*, 2001, still from a color video, 6 minutes.



SIGN OF THE TIMES

I met Annlee one day last August, in the Fifty-seventh Street gallery of Marian Goodman, who represents Pierre Huyghe, one of the men who until recently might have been referred to as Ann's co-owners but who have been reduced, through their own legal sleight of hand, to being just two among her many employers (handlers? puppeteers?). I was a little nervous. I had heard so much about Ann: how she had been created in the strangeness of Japan by a kind of manga talent agency, how she was condemned to death by commerce, given life by art, and was now facing some unknowable third state—release.

I knew before seeing her that she would be a simple girl, not much more than a pair of wide anime eyes—that quintessence of the Japanese weakness for cute—shot through as they always are with Starburst novas. Like most of us, she was conceived as an extra. The anonymous draftsman at that Tokyo house, dashing her off in a spare moment between heroes, had given Ann loads of Japanese schoolgirl charm—*kawaii!*—but no survival skills; she had none of the hit points that might see her through the inevitable trials she would face in a typical, violent cartoon. She could summon no demons and wield no lasers. So her days were numbered by design to a scarce page count or a few dwindling moments on the screen, cut short by early oblivion. It would be *Bambi Meets Godzilla*.

The details of Ann's liberation offer a charming plunge into the French semiotic imagination. That nation, from whom the Japanese adopted the name of their culture-conquering anime, had come, in the persons of Huyghe and his frequent collaborator Philippe Parreno, to take a bit of the magic medium back. In 1999, the two bought Ann from Kworks, a Japanese clearinghouse for animated characters. They saw her in a mail-order catalogue—she was known then, like a radio or a blender, only by some inscrutable proprietary code—and paid forty-six thousand yen (roughly \$432) for her image and the exclusive rights to use it. They named her (Annlee, AnnLee, Ann Lee; in a Parreno animation, *Anywhere Out of the World*, 2000, she states she doesn't care which), and they intended to set her free—not by giving her autonomy, like the Web-roaming cyberstar in William Gibson's 1996 novel *Idoru* (we're not there yet), but by filling Ann, the empty sign, with significance. Then they would pull the plug.

Oh, Ann: Yours is a story of frying pans and fires.

The artists translated her static image into a computer model, redrew her slightly, and made her the open-source, freeware starlet of a time-limited, collaborative enterprise: *No Ghost Just a Shell, un film d'imaginaire*, 1999–2002. (The physical home for the Annlee project is a production facility in Paris, coordinated by the fortuitously named artist Anna-Léna Vaney.) “No Ghost” is, of course, an unveiled reference to the classic 1995 anime film *Ghost in the Shell*. It's 2029: Major Motoko Kusanagi is a typically hypersensualized cyborg reconstruction retaining only half her original human brain (in train-spotting *otaku* circles, her age is said to be

thirty-something, though her robot body replicates a twenty-year-old). She faces off against Project 2501, aka the Puppet Master, a secret, government-spawned Web crawler. When that batch of bad code generates its own sentience and tries to escape the Net by merging with Major Motoko (the genie needs a bottle), she suffers a very human crisis that casts into doubt her place on the man/machine spectrum. Clearly, if she can be overwritten by alien software, she's not human; the only thing that makes her feel like a woman is being treated like one by others.

"Isn't Annlee wonderful?" Marian Goodman asked, after I saw Ann in one of many identical video avatars. "She looks sad," I said. "Yes, but she could also be made to seem gay." *Seem* is the operative word here, for anime is tragic at its root. In it, Japan (the ubiquity of the art gives license to generalize) is seeking that HAL-out-of-control frisson that is probably some pop-psychological balm for a shame-based culture in which abasement—deflation, the novelty of layoffs, geopolitical irrelevance—has become common. Takashi Murakami made this point in a recent essay: "Behind the flashy titillation of *anime* lies the shadow of Japan's defeat in the Pacific War. The world of *anime* is a world of impotence."

And in that world, no one is more impotent than our little Ann, the virtual walk-on, born to be lost in the crowd. Huyghe acknowledges that Ann was not a perfect blank when he found her. "There is something in this sign that has to do with melancholia," he said. "Something in her eyes?" I asked, imagining in those exaggerated pools hints of Borne collectibles or echoes of the malevolent sprites of Yoshitomo Nara, or the conflicted sensualisms of Major Motoko herself. Doesn't Ann embody some flicker of those catalysts for a thousand parallel reveries on a crowded evening train out of Shinjuku? Huyghe would have none of that: "The thought never crossed our minds," he said, laughing. "Don't make it romantic."

"She's just a virgin," he continued, still laughing. "We bought a virgin." For her role as a null set, that's important. But freed from a commercial career, with its scripted intent, Annlee was indentured to art, where projected accidents of meaning are so tenacious. "She's a polyphonic character," Huyghe hedged. "What's interesting about this manga figure is that it's a way to tell a story. A sexual story? You can use her. A dark story? You can use her. A nice story? You can use this character. She's almost like a tool."

A collection of all the recent Annlee "uses" was assembled last year in a show at the Kunsthalle Zürich curated by Huyghe and Parreno and organized by Beatrix Ruf. French artist

IN ALL, FIFTEEN ARTISTS gave Annlee seventeen precious moments. They will be her last; through the clever vehicle of an independent Annlee Association, Huyghe and Parreno have in essence transferred the Annlee copyright back to Annlee.

François Curlet put an ad in the paper and paid a respondent to write a journal for two months; in his video, *Ecran témoin* (Witness screen), 2001, we see the back of Annlee's head, staring out at a gray sea, as she reads the journal aloud. Rirkrit Tiravanija, hearkening to Ann's literary roots, has her reciting eight hours of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* on DVD (2002). In *De la lucidité*, 2002, Pierre Joseph oversaw Ann's work with philosopher Mehdi Belhaj-Kacem on the introduction to his new text *Théorie du Trickster* ("Existence is first and foremost a game . . ."). In *Annlee in Anzen Zone*, 2000, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster presents a doubled Ann left out in the virtual rain, speaking prophecy, in competing English and Japanese, of a coming identity crisis of apocalyptic proportions: "I warn every one of you: There will be no safety zone." Work by Henri Barande, Liam Gillick, M/M Paris, Melik Ohanian, Richard Phillips, Joe Scanlan, Vaney, Huyghe, and Parreno is also included in the show. Among Parreno's contributions is his (and Huyghe's) white neon interpretation of the original Annlee sketch.

The show traveled to the Institute of Visual Culture in Cambridge, England, last month (through January 26) and almost simultaneously to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it will remain on view until mid-March. (We can only hope that the curator there has had the good sense to confront Ann with Murakami's *My Lonesome Cowboy*, 1998, surely a cornerstone of SF MOMA's collection. The sight of his remarkable semen lariat would be the high point of Ann's short life.)

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essence transferred the Annlee copyright back to Annlee. Beyond the works already made and a forthcoming Annlee anthology, use of Ann's likeness in any medium will be forbidden, a ban enforced by association lawyers. (With one exception: On a date unspecified as of this writing, Annlee's face will disappear forever into the sky above Miami, in a fireworks display to be titled *A Smile Without a Cat*.) [Huyghe and Parreno's fireworks launched December 4, 2002. See Centerfold, next page.—Ed.] The intention is more sign play but also, pointedly, to deny her a second life in commerce. For Ann, there will be no stickers or T-shirts, nothing to rival the career of her distant cousin Mr. DOB, the juggernaut of Andre the Giant, or, for that matter, Mickey Mouse. According to Huyghe, "The shows are really the celebration of the disappearance of the sign." Scanlan's contribution, *Last Call (DO-IT-YOURSELF)*, 2002, nails that New Orleans funeral flavor. He made a coffin using only parts available at IKEA. The assembly instructions are illustrated with diagrams of Ann going through the motions. It is shown next to a draft copy of her emancipation proclamation.

TO THE ARTISTS INVOLVED, this experiment is about naming, signification, the creation of a platform for artistic community, even about the perils of copyright in the digital age. But on its face, *No Ghost* is about the limits of vitality.

So, in what fresh purgatory does Ann find herself now? Huyghe is careful to avoid the word "death," preferring to posit Ann in some never-never Valhalla where muted signs talk among themselves for all eternity. But now that the work around Ann has humanized her so relentlessly, it's not hard to imagine for her a conventional mortality. In Annlee, Huyghe, Parreno, et al. have found a disarming Lolita vector for oblique meditations on death.

Huyghe has been particularly merciless. He has killed Annlee twice before: in *Two Minutes Out of Time*, a short from 2000, and in *One Million Kingdoms* (a component of Huyghe's acclaimed installation at the 2001 Venice Biennale), in which a lonely walk on a digitized moon-scape ends with the viewer assuming Ann's point of view, as her world, which has been modeled on language, fragments in its absence. (Both films are in the current shows.)

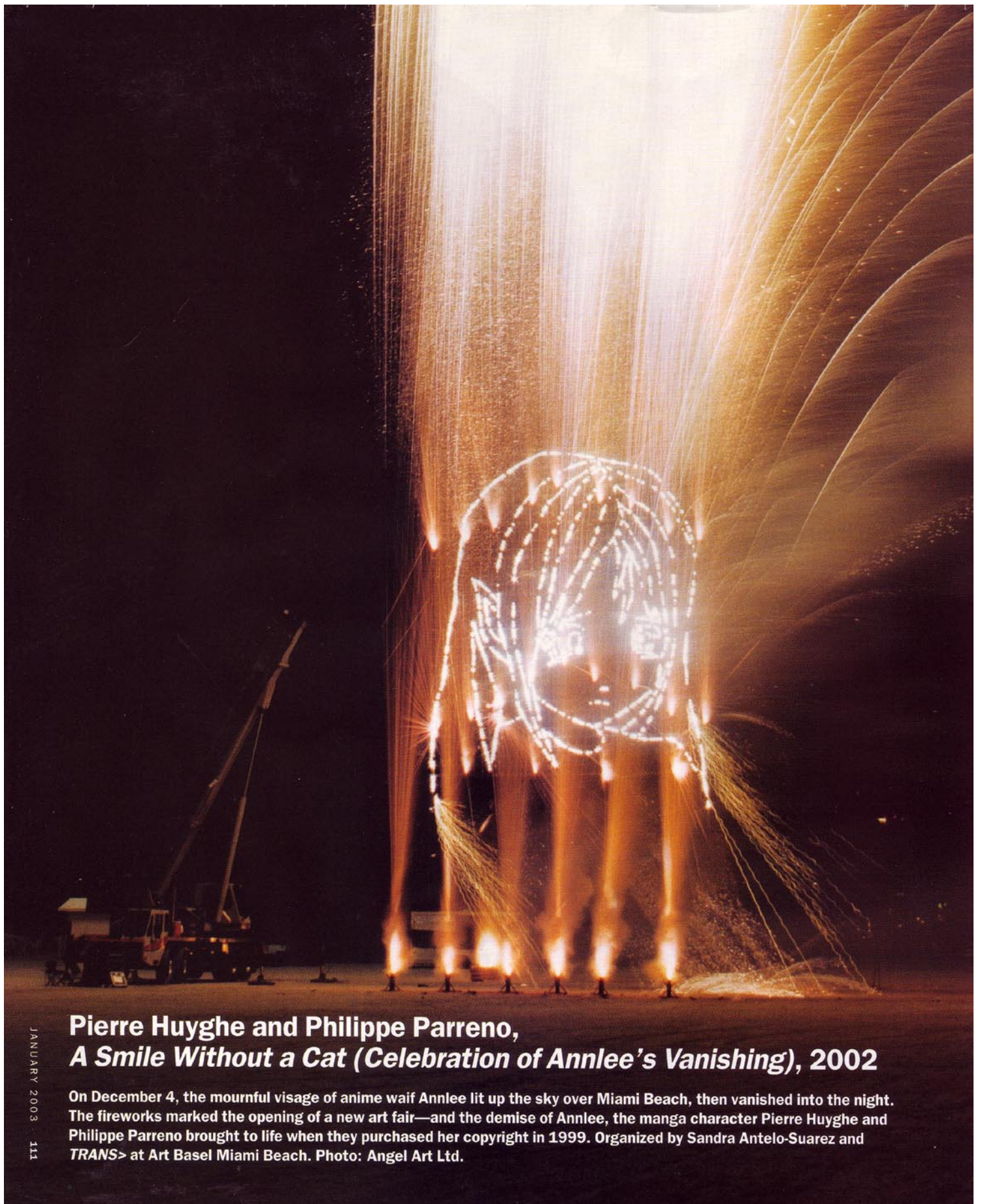
In *Two Minutes*, her debut under Huyghe, Ann is pure, self-aware, and declarative. She appears head and shoulders against a morphing pastel sky and describes herself in the third person: "Nobody planned that she would ever have to speak," she says. "Given no particular ability to survive, she would probably be dead by now. This is her true story: a fictional character with a copyright designed by a company and proposed for sale. That's it. While waiting to be dropped into a story she has been diverted . . . and has become what she is now: a deviant sign."

Then, at the two-minute mark of the four-minute film, she *is* dropped into a story. In search of Annlee's ghost, Huyghe took her picture to the yard of an American school in Paris (he wanted English) and asked several nine-year-olds, "What happens to this character?" One girl he found gave Ann a synesthetic moment she herself had recently had in the Orangerie, mixing first impressions of monumental water lilies with a sunbeam coming through the gallery skylights. Her recorded voice speaks through Ann: "I look at it, I look at it, I couldn't think, I couldn't breathe . . . I was stuck . . . I saw a strange light." This leads to Annlee's first death, a shuddering little death worthy of *Liquid Sky*: "I feel something stronger on my shoulder. It hit me, it hit me, it hurt, and, finally, I saw the light and it was getting bigger and bigger and bigger until I could see nothing else. Finally I felt nothing. I was gone!"

To the artists involved, this experiment is about naming, signification, the creation of a platform for artistic community, even about the perils of copyright in the digital age (a panel discussion, "Creativity and Intellectual Property: What Would Annlee Say?" was convened at SF MOMA last month). But on its face—Ann's face—as Huyghe and Parreno well know, *No Ghost* is about the limits of vitality. Why else would their first move be to develop her from paper to video? From a drawing to an operable model? Why did they breathe life into her, for a time? Why did they give her moments of experience in random episodes and then take them away? Why did they contrive to save her from immortality?

"It's not a death, it's an existence," Huyghe argues. "Ann will be *enfranchised*. We don't have a term for it." But we do now. Annlee is dead. Long live *Annlee*, a sign for banished signs, inaccessible, in a limbo nearly human. □

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**Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno,
A Smile Without a Cat (Celebration of Annlee's Vanishing), 2002**

On December 4, the mournful visage of anime waif Annlee lit up the sky over Miami Beach, then vanished into the night. The fireworks marked the opening of a new art fair—and the demise of Annlee, the manga character Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno brought to life when they purchased her copyright in 1999. Organized by Sandra Antelo-Suarez and *TRANS>* at Art Basel Miami Beach. Photo: Angel Art Ltd.

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