



nature morte

compagnie **yokai** phénomènes surnaturels

at the origins of nature morte

À rebours, a decadent oddity

by JK Huysmans

Des Esseintes, the hero of the novel *À rebours* (*Against Nature*) written by Joris-Karl Huysmans in 1884, had “Any Where Out Of The World” marked above his fireplace, the famous title of one of Baudelaire’s prose poems. This celebrated maxim, which concludes the dialogue of a human with his soul, is not coincidental as it encapsulates des Esseintes’ ultimate aspiration: how does one escape the reality in which one lives? That is a theme dear to me, one I relate to. I often have the same aspiration.

« *Against Nature*, the bible of modern-day neuroses? The handbook of decadentism? (...) Like us, readers, Huysmans ceaselessly wavered between the meanings of his book. The hero of *Against Nature*, who cannot be equated with his author, is nevertheless a figure of uncertainty meeting a murky fate. (...) In fact, “Alone” was the title Huysmans had first considered. It may have been too reminiscent of Baudelaire’s “Alone, at last!” So *À rebours* (*Against Nature*) it would be. Des Esseintes secludes himself to escape men, the major city and its multitude. On the outskirts of Paris, in this small-time rentier suburb, still green in those days, dotted with small castles and crisscrossed with trails, this aristocrat who wants to decide his own destiny finds a location for his retreat. It is there that he lays claim to an ideal life, in what Huysmans repeatedly calls “a cloister.” (...) He needs objects, books of engravings, old and new literature so that he can better practice his cerebral onanism.

But his dissatisfaction haunts him and takes over this shuttered universe. This romantic and Baudelairean fate, which culminated in that fin de siècle period, holds the novel in its disquieting circularity and in the suffocating greenhouses where des Esseintes tends an unusual garden, filled with flowers so monstrous they look like artificial flowers. Nature forges artifice. (...) *Against Nature* doesn’t merely scrutinize the existence of a provincial nobleman – the last of his breed – escaping his century among

the chimera of a world refashioned to his whimsy. We walk into des Esseintes’ house or, rather, we would like to walk into it but fear holds us back. The fear to relate, to engage too closely with this world where dreams and nightmares live together. (...)

A novel free of any guiding narrative but replete with apologues and paradoxically edifying stories inspired by the pedagogy of evil, Against Nature takes us through a mysteriously livable place. (...) More than his inability to travel outside himself, more than his inclination to only enjoy the artificial, des Esseintes’ library and museum, those significant symptoms of his interior exile, are Huysmans’ ideal library and imaginary museum. Des Esseintes gathers at home “a few suggestive works that throw him into an unknown world”, writes Huysmans, and that is the unknown world Huysmans aspires to. (...)

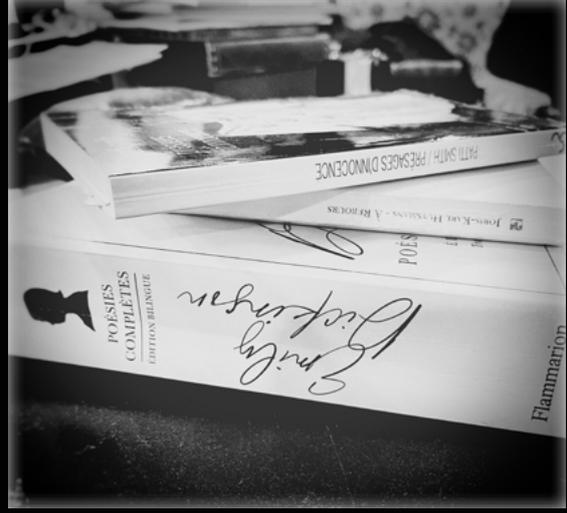
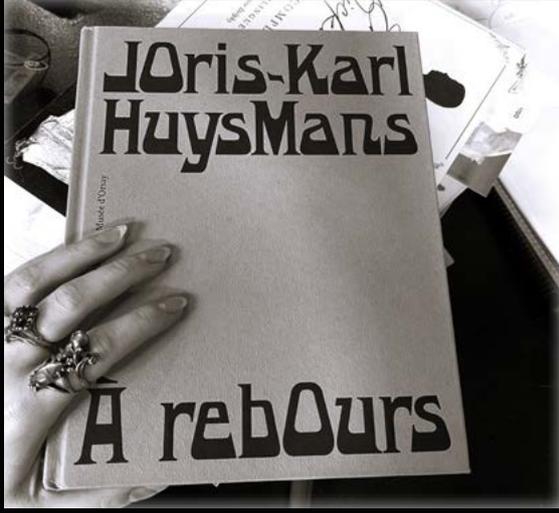
Against Nature displays the luxuries of a dandyism where singularity, decay and immorality serve as a coat of arms. Huysmans, who wanted his hero to run the theater of his exile himself, shows us a man obsessing over the hanging of artworks, a set designer of his own fantasies. (...) Against Nature is all museum and images. The rare flowers, where the natural imitates the artificial, are talking images, visual charades. (...) In this century where everyone travels without seeing anything, he prefers to see without traveling. »

Excerpt from the Preface to *Against Nature*
by Stéphane Guégan and André Guyaux
published by Gallimard/Musée d’Orsay, October 2019



*I never felt a part of this world
I reject the way that we live
I gave birth to my own enemy*

Anohni ☞ You are my enemy



nature morte

a deliberately thought-provoking and open-ended title

« Interestingly, the title Nature Morte translates as “still life” in English but literally means “dead nature”. Therefore, life is not emphasized in the French phrase. Instead, nature assumes an all-encompassing character and its stillness as represented on a picture is conceived as a kind of death. »

Jean-Charles Ladurelle, translator with company Yōkai

What is particularly interesting about the decadent period of the late 19th century is what it reveals and what the character of des Esseintes brings into sharp focus. And that is the relationship of humans to “Nature” and “artifice”/“the artificial”, and his reflection on those two concepts. Des Esseintes is convinced – like many others to this day – that “Nature” no longer has anything to offer to humans... What a terrible viewpoint. To look at and address “Nature” like something outside of humanity, which we are not part of, on the premise that humans – through their discoveries and (artificial) technological advances – claim to be able to live without that “Nature and surpass it. But above all, and that’s a key element of what I want to tackle in this creation, they claim to control it to better exploit it. And here is that pronounced hubris that so much defines the patriarchal society I live in.

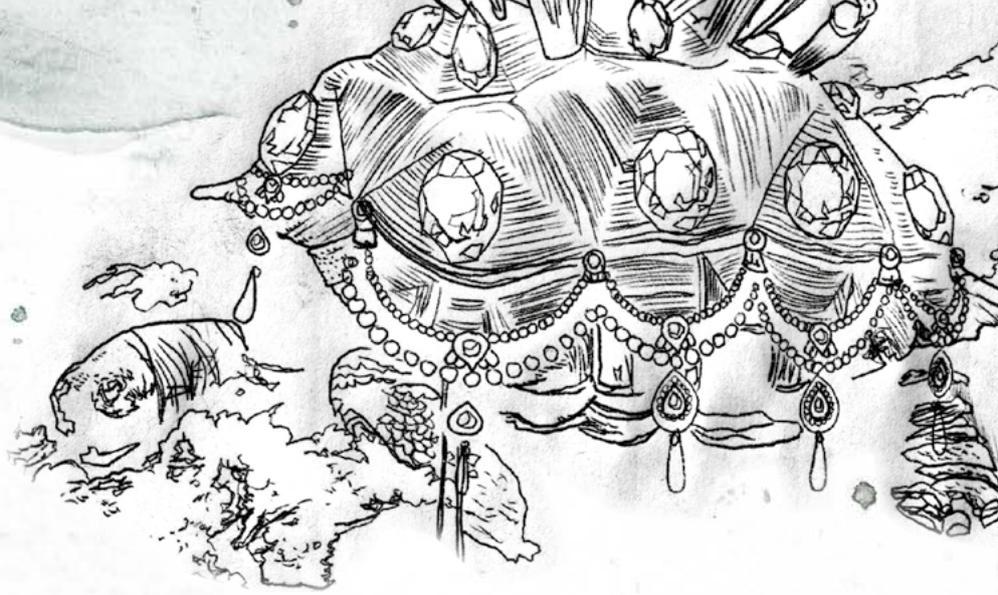
The Western human being does not strive to “live with” but to “live above” everything else. Everything is incidental, nothing is a partner. Des Esseintes points to this relationship in a singular, poetic and puzzling way. The microcosm he recreates and in which he wants to live, eventually slips away from him and devours him before he decides to pull himself out of it. At first, he wants to recreate the natural with the artificial and then later aspires to the opposite: to recreate the artificial with the natural; in other words, to recreate another reality, with laws he would like to lay down and control. He only partly achieves that goal

because what he wants to “tame”/“shape” ends up dying (his tortoise), slipping away (his flowers) or disrupting him physiologically (he experiences olfactory hallucinations, vertigo, nightmares, etc.). Therefore, it is what surrounds him that must die and fade away – objects, animals, minerals, plants – so that he will survive. Because what surrounds him lives on, he finally consents to a “return to civilization” by leaving his experimental refuge in Fontenay to move back to Paris. In a way, he chooses not to change and adapt his human existence to this new surrounding reality. He somehow refuses to reconnect with the “natural” which he views as “unnatural” if he cannot fully orchestrate it and dominate it completely.



*But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.
To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get.*

Emily Dickinson



Will the extinction of humans and their ever-growing need to control through the increasingly “artificial” give way to another equilibrium? In a day and age when the concept of “artificial intelligence” is the talk of the town, featured in any product to the point of becoming an idea so vague and accepted that we don’t take time to think about the roots of that concept, revisiting the decadent waves of the 19th century might reflect back our own decadent tsunami.



*Do animals cry like humans
as I having lost you
yowled flagged
curled in a ball
This is how
we beat the icy field
shoeless and empty handed
hardly human at all
Negotiating a wilderness
we have yet to know
this is where time stops
and we have none to go*

Patti Smith *∞* Wilderness

I believe this form of resignation, this return to the “known” and rejection of the “unknown” is revealing and prevalent in the behaviors of the society I live in. We are afraid of what we don’t know and if that unknown, whatever it is, does not conform to our known, there can be no alternative. No possible adjustment. We want it gone so we won’t contemplate for one second our own adaptation/mutation/transformation, or even disappearance, mainly physical and physiological. That’s exactly what I want to convey in *Nature Morte*. The focus, the main (magical) dramaturgical issue can be articulated this way: what if this process begun and abandoned by des Esseintes came to an end and that this “perceived” as artificial reverted to the “natural”? What if des Esseintes failed to escape what he initiated and that his body envelope – affected by its surroundings – were able to continue its disappearance and transformation process?



*Something’s inside me
Unborn and unblessed
Disappears in the ether
This world to the next
Human kindness*

PJ Harvey *∞* When Under Ether





beyond against nature

choosing the magical extension and the appearance of the fantastic

The terribly relevant topic of *Against Nature* offers uncharted avenues for magical and puppeteering exploration where the issue of the disappearance of humans and the appearance of creatures, which form the core of the company Yôkai's creative identity, resonates tremendously.

What if des Esseintes had never returned to Paris, what would have happened? That is the starting point of *Nature Morte*. This tipping point of the fantastic where the magical – first contained and distilled in the strange decadent routine of an old cranky recluse – blossoms and manifests itself in a world free of any human control, suffused with sensory disruptions. Along these lines, I want to work on the presence of disruptive and specific smells taking over all or some of the audience's space so that des Esseintes' visual and olfactive hallucinations are experienced by audiences in a strong and direct way.

There is an "in-between" quality that is very specific to certain objects surrounding des Esseintes – mirrors, taxidermies, plants, paintings, skeletons etc. – where life seems to creep in and out continually. These are powerful, quintessentially puppet-related objects and the question of their particular status, their presence at the boundary between the dead and the living will be a particular area of focus in this show.

The uncertainty about the nature of those presences – a key issue investigated in *Nature Morte* – will be constantly sustained. The connection between the soul and the "envelope," the internal and the external, will be emphasized by the matter "smoke" through lightning or gradual disappearances/appearances throughout the show.

The creative process and premises of this work also fit into the scope of the company's research program *Réveil Invisible* (*Invisible Awakening*). Indeed, each hyperreal creature – foxes, bird skeleton, turtles, etc. – is brought back to life with remote and "custom-made" animation tailored to the dramaturgical choices made beforehand.



Broken sleep, all too human

A malady

It's gazing through when I

Dream me a dream

(...)

Shapes of smoke, all too human

They grow like titans

I would like to fall, silence every call

(...)

A. Obel  Broken Sleep



Réveil Invisible

In order to delve into the impact of odd and surreal presences on the audience, the company Yôkaï is pursuing research around autonomous hybrid creatures at the intersection of magic, puppetry, and digital technology. This project, to which is linked *Nature Morte*, is called *Réveil Invisible* (*Invisible Awakening*).

Unleashing the potential of hidden animation for the conception of theatrical performances, this program taps into the technological advances that have emerged in the world of film VFX over the

last decades. By reclaiming and reinventing these tools on stage, a new and enriching approach to puppetry and its transmission is made possible. The first stage of the research takes place in the US in the fall of 2022. Several members of the company Yôkaï meet those who have contributed to these major breakthroughs, including Peter Brooke and John Criswell from the Jim Henson's Creature Shop in Los Angeles.



The term Yôkaï refers to a Japanese monster and translates loosely as supernatural phenomenon/anything that is not human.

After graduating from ESNAM (National School of Puppetry Arts) in 2014, Violaine Fimbel created the company Yôkaï, whose first show *VOLATILE(S)* toured Finland, Germany, Brazil, Japan and Avignon.

The company's creative identity is characterized by unsettling aesthetics and fantastic forms originating from Violaine Fimbel's imagination or drawn from the visual arts – film, painting, sculpture, illustration, etc. – and literature.

In order to build on her instinctive practice of magic, which was featured in her first show, Violaine attended a training in “new magic” led at the CNAC by Raphaël Navarro and Valentine

Losseau, founders of the company 14:20. There she discovered an art form and an anthropological approach that mirrored her own research and complemented her intuitive process with theoretical materials.

In 2020, Violaine and mech designer Marjan Kunaver initiated an explorative research program aimed at connecting and adapting film VFX to the stage for the conception of magical and puppetry productions. This project called *Réveil Invisible* (*Invisible Awakening*, see above) puts invisible animation at the heart of the research and creative process.

The career path and creative process of Violaine received the creation and experimentation award from the International Puppetry Institute at the 2021 World Puppet Theater Festival.

nature morte

Cast (in progress)

Conception and dramaturgy
Violaine Fimbel

Mech designer
Marjan Kunaver

Choreographic advice
Jérôme Brabant

Dramaturgy outside eye
Iris Keller
Chloée Sanchez

Performance
Quentin Cabocel

Lightboard operator / manipulation
Nicolas Poix, Manon Choserot, Candice Picaud

Fabricators
Manon Choserot, Violaine Fimbel,
Marjan Kunaver, Nicolas Poix

Costumes
Jennifer Minard

Drawings
Jean-Luc Navette

All audiences from age 11 up

Running time: 75 minutes
Audience capacity: 250 people

Video material

Presentation of *Réveil Invisible*:
<https://vimeo.com/603887376>

Teaser of *Nature Morte*:
<https://vimeo.com/672071109>

Production schedule (in progress)

- CDN Besançon Franche-Comté
from 1st to 13th November 2022
- La Nef – Saint-Dié-des-Vosges
from 5th to 17th December 2022
- La Madeleine, scène conventionnée – Troyes
from 13th to 25th February 2023
- Espace 110 – Centre culturel d'Illzach
from 17th to 22nd April 2023
- Premieres Autumn 2023

Coproductions and sponsors

Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes
– Charleville-Mézières • La Madeleine, scène
conventionnée – Troyes • Le Théâtre de
Marionnettes de Maribor – Slovénie • CDN
Besançon Franche-Comté • Maillon, Théâtre
de Strasbourg – Scène européenne • Saint-Ex,
culture numérique – Reims • Espace 110 – Centre
culturel d'Illzach • La Nef – Saint-Dié-des-
Vosges • DRAC Grand Est • Région Grand Est •
Département de la Marne • Ville de Reims • Ville
de Charleville-Mézières • Institut Français Paris •
AVIAMA • Société Compositex – Troyes

Technical rider

- Min. dimensions: 8m x 8m x 6m
- Black Marley dance floor
- Black leg and border masking
- Grid for rigging pipes and electrics
- Smoke detector with disabling function
- 6 people on tour



Phénomènes Surnaturels



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