

Gloria Maria Cappelletti and Fabrizio Meris, "Interview with Philippe Parreno at Fondation Beyeler," *The Collector Tribune*, July 2012

THE COLLECTOR TRIBUNE

the daily for art collectors

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Philippe Parreno at Fondation Beyeler, photo credits: Gloria Maria Cappelletti

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by Gloria Maria Cappelletti, Fabrizio Meris

This conversation took place on the occasion of **Philippe Parreno's** recent exhibition at the **Fondation Beyeler** in Basel, on view until September 30th.

The French artist presents two new films mise en scene with a choreography of sound and images that guides the visitor throughout the space. The first film *C.H.Z. ("Continuously Habitable Zones")* is linked to a territory. The film gives perspective to a black garden constructed in Portugal. A landscape produced a film, and a film produced a landscape. The

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landscape is perennial; it is what the image rejects. A second film, "*Marilyn*", is a portrait of a ghost, Marilyn Monroe. The film conjures her with a phantasmagoric seance in the suite at the hotel Waldorf Astoria in New York where she lived in the 1950s. Her presence is reproduced by three algorithms: the camera becomes her eyes, a computer reconstructs the prosody of her voice and a robot recreates her handwriting. The dead is incarnated in an image.

Gloria Maria Cappelletti | Fabrizio Meris

We've been digging into your work, and I do mean digging, because your work is very complex.

Philippe Parreno

Sorry about that.

GMC | FM

No, no. It's more interesting that way.

PP

So, you were not bored?

GMC | FM

Not at all. With its complexity, we were able to better discuss it. Before we interview artists, we like to have a dialogue between ourselves, about the art, and arrive in front of the artist to share our thoughts and ideas. We would like you to tell us what you think of how we perceive your art.

PP

Ok. That's very interesting.

GMC | FM

The two films you've presented, "Continuous Habitable Zones (C.H.Z.)" and "Marilyn", are conceived as two portraits. We thought that C.H.Z. represents a video camera forging the landscape of a ghostly parallel world. And Marilyn resembles an algorithm mimicking the ghost of a human being.

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Are your films an attempt to visualize a dimension of consciousness? Is the ghost our consciousness, or perhaps your consciousness?

PP

This could be a way to put it. Are you referring to “Marilyn”?

GMC | FM

We’re referring, actually, to both works. We see a parallel between the two works. There is a force in the way you have the camera surfing on the landscape and in the room. This creates a feeling of a third dimension like a ghost or a possible landscape that doesn’t actually exist. This tension becomes the ghost. In both works, we felt this tension. Is this tension a dimension of consciousness – what we are made of?

PP

I think both films explore the link between an image and reality. This has been an ongoing question for me since the first time I saw an image.

With “C.H.Z.,” I’m establishing a link, a bond between the image and what the image produced, which is the landscape that survives and becomes autonomous. On one hand, you have the picture which is represented in the Museum, at the Fondation Beyeler, which now belongs to the museumography. On the other hand, you have the image that was expelled and projected and finally lives autonomously. I’m interested in establishing a bond between these two worlds. You could say that “C.H.Z.” produced life. But the images, of course, want to recognize what is produced. There’s a line from Bataille that says, “the mind produces something that the mind doesn’t want to recognize.” So, “C.H.Z.” produced life.

My film, “Marilyn”, opposes this. It’s a moment in history where we all realize that an image can kill. On one hand, it’s a portrait of an image that produced life. But, it’s also a portrait of an image that killed – that suppressed life. I created two different ways to approach the same relationship to portraiture – similar to my film “Zidane”, but in a different way.

When Marilyn Monroe died it was the first time, maybe in history, that we realize that the unconsciousness can kill. For “C.H.Z.,” consciousness produces life.

GMC | FM

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What do you think about the increasingly important dialogue between science and art?

PP

I am not sure about science, but I use technology like everyone else. In “Marilyn”, there is technology and science. I use it without really thinking about it. The idea stemmed from my fascination with Marilyn Monroe’s hand written notes. I first saw them in a book that was published about her. I liked her handwriting. So I worked with an architect that specializes in robots to see how we could replicate her human handwriting. The process was long and complicated, as you can imagine. We worked with the University of Gottingen, in Germany, to produce the robot.

The idea was that the hand writes what the eyes see and the recreated voice says what the hand has written. This creates a loop where this ghost is trapped in a time zone.

Then, when you start to replicate humanity with the tools of technology, you have what a Japanese robotics professor coined the “Uncanny Valley theory.” This means that when you perfectly represent the human face in 3D, the more it looks like a human, the more our brain rejects it as human – we feel a sensation of revulsion brought on by the uncanniness of this semi human/semi machine. This is, I suppose, a survival mechanism we all have.

This is also what the film, “Marilyn”, is all about. You see Marilyn. You want her to be there. But, at the end of the film, you realize that she was never there. It’s a form of deception.

GMC | FM

You’ve mentioned the importance of the dimension of time in the “Marilyn” piece. But in “C.H.Z.”, time is somewhat suspended. Can you comment on that?

PP

It’s a loop. It’s like each element of the exhibition is one part of an automaton. By definition, an automaton mimicks life, but it essentially does only one thing over and over again. For me, the exhibition is like an automaton.

“C.H.Z.” is a loop. Even the land eventually returns to its starting point, that is we end up at the same topographic level where the film began.

“Marilyn” is a loop as well, in the way that she can’t describe anything that’s not built in – trapped into always coming back in time to where she started.

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It's more, for me, a way to put two images into the exhibition space. To see how, depending on where you are, you can experiment with those images. During the film, depending on whether you stand in front of "Marilyn", or are sitting in the other room watching "C.H.Z.", or looking at the ripples in the Fondation's pond, or watching it on a DVD at home, you will have different experiences.

It's as if topologically, depending on from where you experience the piece, you can have an experience with it. This is also what the show is about – trying to establish all the relative distances. This allows the image to exist and escape its frame.

GMC | FM

Is the idea of "celebration" the ethical aspect of your work?

PP

Yes, you could see it that way. In fact, I'm going to do a show at the Palais de Tokyo next year and it will be called "Celebration". So, you're right. I don't know if it's the ethical aspect of my work, but it's definitely central. There is no object of art without its exhibition, or celebration. You always have to establish a relation between the production of form and the exhibition of form. For me, they are both totally dependent on each other. You're absolutely right.

GMC | FM

Thanks for your time and insight to your inspiration.

PP

Thank you.

For further information: <http://www.fondationbeyeler.ch/en>