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Philippe Parreno

Just a smile in the shell

In 1991, Chris Marker, director of the mythical *La Jetée* in 1972, presented a complex installation at the Centre Pompidou with the programmatic title *Zapping Zone*. Heralding the use of new media in the work of art, he combined television sets and the now obsolete early Apple II GS Macs to form an interactive zone where the spectator could engage in the typical 1990s activity of zapping. The juxtaposition of TV images such as footage of the Ceaușescus' downfall in Romania, personal images like the owl or cat from his famous bestiary and images shot in various big cities around the world, along with the cacophony of all the videos playing at once, underscored the media stratification of a time that was no longer uniform but rather multi-layered, not to mention the spectator's possibility of choosing when to hit pause.

Around the same time, Philippe Parreno was just starting out, working with Bernard Joisten and Pierre Joseph, some friends from the Grenoble art school, as well as Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. The collective had created a piece that also took its inspiration from the realm of television, the famous *Videozone* of 1989. The work consisted of a giant inflatable

TV gleaned from an advertising fair on which they screened a video showing a succession of images pulled from various sources and “remixed”, like the house music in its heyday at the time. The piece was damaged in storage at the Fonds National d’Art Contemporain in Puteaux so I had a hard time seeing it as it was intended, but I remember the video that, as with Marker, displayed a media time that created the perception of heterochronology in the work.

Awareness of time is a constituent of Parreno’s early work. “Time is a space,” he said. This thought drove him to give “a perception of the world, not a representation”.¹

In his book *Speech Bubbles*, he talks of the influence – which holds for an entire generation – of Harold Ramis’s film *Groundhog Day*, where a time glitch condemns Bill Murray of *Ghostbusters* fame to relive the same day – February 2 or “groundhog day” – over and over again.

As the 1990s began, I myself was marked by how our experience of time and space shifted as travel and communication grew increasingly easier. First there was the fax, then e-mail, not to mention cell phones that made some people literally phone-dependant for awhile. These technologies radically changed the world of art and its practice by engendering a hyperconnectivity and ultrafast development of networks. Our lives were starting to be redefined in keeping with a zapping mode that grew familiar or even normal in the 2000s. We could choose our own time or weather and leap from one state of being to the next with a speed sometimes superior to that of biological time. Today, these changes in our perception of reality seem as radical as the invention of electricity was in the modern world.

Parreno is an extreme example of this generation that chooses to zap and select as it pleases. Hopping from one plane to the next, turning up early at art openings in order to

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, catalogue *Le Capital*, Centre d’Art Contemporain, Sète, July 1999.

make it to another being held at the same time in a different place, Parreno seems the epitome of a generation made more of zappers than nomads, a generation for whom place is less important than time and time zones.

Parreno began fleeing time constraints of any kind back in the early 90s while he was in residence in Nice. In 1990, *Les Ateliers du Paradis* were held for one summer month in the former Air de Paris gallery. On the agenda was the idea of inhabiting the present via an event “in progress”, with a camera rolling off in the corner as in the days of the Factory to document it all with a film in real time. Already in this collective piece, we can already see the new ways the artwork appears in time and space. In a kind of sit-in, artists Parreno, Pierre Joseph and Philippe Perrin occupied the gallery that had been transformed into a chill-out space complete with couch, TV sets, videos and Playstation.

After this real time artwork-exhibition, which fits into an aesthetic of free time collectively illustrated with the *Association des Temps Libérés (Freed Time Association)* founded by Pierre Huyghe in 1995 – a true generational statement –, Parreno explored an inverse process with *No More Reality*, as if his goal were to imagine every aspect of time. On the one hand, the exhibition entailed several episodes that took place in different, successive, unrelated temporalities. On the other, it allowed virtual instants to actually happen.² Objects were used to insert the suspended time of a film on pause into real time. For example, the giant screaming baby’s head from Tim Burton’s *Batman* is on a balloon blocking entry to the space; the “Welcome to Twin Peaks” sign from David Lynch’s TV series; or else the Mogwai from Joe Dante’s *Gremlins 2*, crushed in a photocopy machine.

Parreno’s conviction that the artist “must take charge of the conditions for how his work is made visible” led him to create

² See the interview with Nicolas Bourriaud, *art press* no. 208, pp. 41-44, 1995.

Time Factor/ Postman Time in 1994.³ A pneumatic house was set up on the roof of the Kunstraum in Vienna, floating above the exhibition that had become “a sitcom set”. Every day, a young man would come to change into a postal uniform and distribute flyers throughout the city. He would talk to the Viennese residents about the images, thereby taking up a bit of their time. The exhibition took place off its own premises, interfering with private space and time in accordance with a model of temporal discontinuity that wound up being the basis of Parreno’s major work from the mid-1990s, *Snow Dancing*.

The piece *Snow Dancing* partially took place at the Consortium in Dijon in 1995. This programmatic work made two main assumptions. On the one hand, as in *Time Factor*, temporal linearity was broken with the intention of deliberately giving a “temporal hierarchy” to reality, image and its commentary.⁴ Parreno lauded the invention of “space-times in which these three elements could be simultaneously apprehended.” On the other, the consequences of this break appear on the level of the subject. Like the children inaugurating *No More Reality* chanted in their schoolyard demonstration in 1991, the contemporary subject is subjugated to an absence of reality in a logic that is highly postmodern. “No More Reality” read the signs waved by these children born in a Lyotardian era. This typical acknowledgment of the 1990s decade with its absent subject would become the origin of *Ann Lee*, centered around the notion of the ghost subject.

In a logic of reinvention, *Snow Dancing* would be followed by the attempt to replay the instant, to fill the empty shell of the subject, with the portrait of Zidane in the late 2000s.

As for *Snow Dancing*, the work began with a book outlining a future event that took about two hours to read,

³ Ibid., p. 43.

⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

corresponding more or less to the time the inauguration of the exhibition lasted.

Over the course of this event, some 300 people randomly encountered in the city were invited to participate in various activities in a public building. A party was held – complete with alcohol and “international music that sometimes stopped” – and clues given for the continuation of the exhibition. Parreno thus combined the time of the event with the past and traces of it (electrical adapters, transformers, footprints), including a past that predated the event, since there were flyers floating around for a 1978 carnival with a Flipper the Dolphin theme. The only recording of this event was made by Radio Reality, which broadcast the party on FM; no photos or videos were purposely made.

The opening was held after the event, as if to celebrate the absence of the event’s present, which appeared only as an empty shell. No More Reality. Just a Shell. In fact, empty or hollow objects abound in Parreno’s work. If he actually does create an object, it’s often just traces, footprints or phantoms, like the collection of transparent objects shown in Paris for the inauguration of the new Air de Paris gallery on the Rue Louise Weiss. In 1997, traces of three events reemerged: *Snow Job*, relic items from a sand castle built in 1995; *Footsteps* “left over” from *Snow Dancing* two years earlier; and finally the transparent loudspeaker used by a hypnotizer to put a public to sleep (*Listen to that Picture*). With Parreno, there’s a fundamental rupture with the positioning of the subject as it still appears with Hains. We’re definitely dealing with the poststructuralist subject as defined in *The Postmodern Condition* by Jean-François Lyotard, a philosopher Parreno met at the Institut des Hautes Etudes and particularly revered for his exhibition and catalogue *Les Immatériaux* (1985) at the Centre Pompidou.

These temporal games continued with *Anna Sanders* in 1997, a collaboration between Pierre Huygue and Philippe Parreno based on the desire to always be able to replay time. Refusing temporal linearity, Parreno created a character who moved backward in time, a little girl who first appeared in a magazine. The girl suffers from Merlin's disease and grows younger and younger each day. Although she's the main character in a film called *History of a Feeling*, she never actually appears and remains a "nonlinear character", "hyperfragmented" in a story with no outline or plot. She begs the question of knowing how "to define our lives according to time codes", "rewinding or fast-forwarding to make and unmake sequences." To be able to "re-edit our lives and especially to understand them".⁵ Parreno thus created a disjointed subject in a fragmented time, a mutant subject that simultaneously had "an absence of roots and a multiplicity of roots."

The idea of the time code is crucial to Parreno, reappearing in a recent interview about the *Fade to Black* exhibition at the Kunstverein in Munich. This work gathered posters printed in fluorescent ink that would glow in the dark for a predetermined amount of time. The posters are also "ghost works that don't want to die", works that need to be reactivated, like the sculpture *Ice Man in Reality Park* (1995). The ice man had to be replaced each day since the exhibition wasn't held at Christmas but rather in the heart of summer in a Tokyo park.

The idea of the ghost and a second parallel life resurfaced a few years later with *Ann Lee*, a work marked by the influence of video games. In 1999, in an art market irony of fate, Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huygue acquired the rights to an unused manga figure they called Ann Lee from a Japanese agency for the modest sum of 46,000 yen. This was the beginning of the *No Ghost Just a Shell* project that a dozen or so artists –

⁵ Interview with Philippe Parreno by Jean-Max Colard, *zéro deux*, no. 37, 2006.

from Liam Gillick to François Curlet to M/M for the posters – participated in, inventing a life for this “stillborn” character. The attempt to create a collective work was shown as a whole in 2003 at the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven. This paradoxal enterprise consisted in the collective use of a ghost character and virtual existence to construct real fictional stories that underline the irreality of the character. Just a Shell. In the one-minute animation *Anywhere Out of the World* (2000), the manga explains, “I am Ann Lee!... I am a product, a product freed from the marketplace... after being sold, I was redesigned... I have no voice... I belong to whomever is able to fill me with any kind of imaginary material. Anywhere out of the world.” In this way, Parreno was able to build a work on the absence of real time and the absence of the subject from itself.

As we already saw with *No More Reality* and the “real virtuality” described by Nicolas Bourriaud, this shadow of an absent reality that appears in the work of art – a time that only exists by its reflection or frozen time – was one of Parreno’s building blocks in the 1990s. In terms of time as subject, this reappears with the carpet *6:00 P.M.* (2000) made with Pierre Huygue, a work that couldn’t be more explicit, since the window’s shadow at 6 p.m. doesn’t correspond to any architectural reality of the place where it’s displayed. Several ghostlike objects fit into the same logic, like those evoked earlier or even the doorknobs that recall improbable Christmas ornaments.

If we understand Parreno in the literary sense, an artist who’s fond of scientific analogies, we remark that the concept of the ghost today lies at the heart of recent models of cosmological topology, notably that of Jean-Pierre Luminet, an expert on black holes and the Big Bang.⁶ Luminet has come up with a model of a “wraparound” space that creates phantom images of

⁶ Jean-Pierre Luminet, *L’Univers chiffonné* (The Wraparound Universe), Folio Essais, Gallimard, Paris, 2005.

distant galaxies – cosmic mirages. In his recent publication, he explains that if telescopes like the Hubble can capture images of millions of galaxies, there's nothing to say that the oldest galaxies aren't ghost images of the most recent ones, which supports the hypothesis of a multi-related space of crystalline structure resembling an infinity of dodecahedrons.

Parreno's experiments with exhibition time led to *Alien Seasons* at the ARC in 2002, a work as duration, temporal stratification or a layering of fragments of space and time. The exhibition, introduced by Jaron Lanier, inventor of virtual reality, was presented as a memory of the earth in the mind of an alien who, after a visit there, lost all his records and was trying to remember the arctic flora and marine fauna. The exhibition began with *El Sueño de Una Cosa*, a piece that juxtaposes memories of twentieth-century works in the form of a replication of Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting*, 1951, and a looped moment of silence, John Cage's famous 4'33", first performed at Woodstock by David Tudor in 1952. Cage was influenced by Eastern and Zen philosophy when he wrote this 4 min. 33 sec. silent score in which the only sounds in the piece are those made by the audience. Finally, a black curtain would come down and a short film shot by Parreno in Iceland and set to the opening bars of Edgar Varèse's *Desert* was projected onto Rauschenberg's painting to round out the show with flowers blooming at high speed.

Like Rauschenberg's painting, 4'33" appears in Parreno's work as if to acknowledge a point of no return in the history of art, a blank page that marked the beginning of a new temporality where "real durations are changing." "Form is right here right now," wrote John Cage in his text written for *45' for a Speaker* in 1954 (reprinted in *Silence*, 1961), heralding the 1990s much more than his immediate successors.

Later on, a giant cuttlefish – a chameleon-like creature from the South Pacific – played the emcee, its shifting colors setting the tempo of sequences with a time controller. The creature had an image-generating feature that could actually project abstract visions on the surface of its body. The video *Credits* finished up the itinerary with the suspended time of memory, recalling the urbanism of the 1970s that Parreno experienced growing up in Grenoble. Meanwhile, at night, *Mont Analogue*, monochromatic sequences edited on the basis of Morse code, transmitted a story based on a René Daumel novel.

This refusal of temporal linearity was later reiterated with *The Boy from Mars*, where a building designed by the architect François Roche provided the screenplay for a film, while the film became a way of producing the building. Reality is the pretext for a piece of fiction that allows a fragment of reality to be created. The strategy of looping the work's time and the loop between reality and fiction is in full swing.

The film on Zidane made with Douglas Gordon constituted an attempt to renew the instant and redefine a subject. The film takes place during the time of a match, “from the kick-off to the final whistle”, Saturday April 23, 2005 in Madrid. The idea was to make a portrait of Zidane, “a twentieth-century portrait”, “face to face as close as necessary as long as possible”⁷. Parreno's hope was to fill Ann Lee's empty shell by wondering how to be in reality, how to have a relationship with others within the instant, contrary to the previous spectral works marked by an absence of the present. *Zidane* was an attempt at reappropriation as opposed to the presentism described by François Hartog.

⁷ Phrases excerpted from the film subtitles and voice-over.

After a preamble, the action of the film begins, though for the most part it's masked since the camera is trained on Zidane, providing a subjective view of his reality as if we were actually in his shoes.

There's an obvious parallel to be made with Warhol's portrait of John Giorno, *Sleep*, which was inspired by watching the poet sleep. *Sleep* was Warhol's first film, shot in 1963, and it aimed to stretch time with a slow-motion static shot and infinite repetition of the same image. The shots are repeated and permuted. The slow projection of six reels during six hours was made at the rate of 16 images per second rather than 24, creating an impression of slowness and an unsubjective time that is stretched out – an eternal time.

Parreno's intent, on the contrary, was to make the portrait of an instant in the heart of heterochronology, even though time is also occasionally elastic. The issue, he claimed, was "an instant of life".⁸ In fact, what interested Parreno and Gordon about Zidane was that the athlete "exists in the instant", that "he's intense in the instant". "Can we spend time with someone else? Without needing artifice, the illusion of fiction?" Parreno mused.

Unlike Warhol's film, what we're given in *Zidane* is real time, that of a 90-minute match with no fiction and no story. "It's pretty close to real time, but it's a subjective real time, with moments that last longer than others. Time grows a bit elastic, because inside the fixed time of 90 minutes, we try to find deltas and forge a relationship with the instant," Parreno explains.

The portrait of Zidane gradually evokes different times – distant memories, the factual present with several instants, short-term memory, imminent future – a sort of portrait of times existing within heterochronology for a potential future.

⁸ Philippe Parreno, *zéro deux*, op. cit.

“Who’d have thought that in the future, we’d be able to remember this extraordinary day like a stroll in the park?” This sentence, which opens and closes the film, seems to carry the agenda of a work that incites us to saunter through time, sampling various viewpoints here and there.

In the subjective time of *Zidane*, we first notice the time of re-memory through the conjuring of a past perception. “When I was a little boy, I liked to comment on my moves on the field, but it wasn’t really my voice. It was Pierre Cangion’s voice, the *Téléfoot* sportscaster.” “I was drawn to it. I’d sit there, as close as I could, as long as I could.”

Present perception is thus described while the film shows a Zidane submerged in his immediate sensations. “I hear someone moving in their seat. I hear someone cough. I hear someone talking to the guy next to him. I imagine the sound of a watch ticking.”

Then it’s short-term memory with a vision of the immediate future. “I remember a match where something incredible happened. I got the ball and even before I touched it, I knew exactly what was going to happen. I knew I was going to score. That was the only time that ever happened to me.”

And then, when the film is more than halfway over, the parallel events of the day suddenly appear, the factual present of the world. “In Brazil on the beach of Ipanema, a puppeteer brings Bob Marley back to life. Hundreds of houses were destroyed in the worst floods to hit Serbia and Montenegro in over 40 years.”

What follows is an evocation of natural and environmental disasters, video games, eBay auctions, the Voyager spacecraft observing plasma waves at the edges of the solar system, terrorism and bomb attacks, globalization and the Asia-Africa Summit. All this is blended with the narrator’s personal history

via inserts such as “my son had a fever this morning” or “there was something I was supposed to do today”.

Finally we get Zidane’s commentary on memory itself. “You don’t necessarily remember a match as a ‘real-time’ experience... My memories of a match are fragmented.”

This is precisely what happens for viewers, who pull themselves out of the film and wonder what they saw, having drifted over images and music as if strolling through a “land of events”. What’s left is the memory of a fragmented perception and fragments of time. In short, a portrait of the twenty-first century, the century of instants that pass at the speed of light where all you have to do is hit the remote control or flip on the Wi-Fi to move on to something else. In the end, the subject is still just as impenetrable and ghostlike. He simply cracks a grin, the only moment Zidane grows emotional and human. Just a smile in the shell.