

McDonough, Tom, *Philippe Parreno, Centre Pompidou, Artforum Magazine*, November 2009, XLVIII, No. 3, pp. 220-221 (ill.)

## Philippe Parreno

CENTRE POMPIDOU

Tom McDonough

A LARGE CANOPY OF PLEXIGLAS, neon, and rows of twinkling lights—the kind of thing typically found above the entry to a movie theater—announced Philippe Parreno's retrospective at the Centre Pompidou. Only after passing beneath *Marquee*, 2009, the latest in a suite of similar works begun in 2006, did one enter the vast, almost empty space of the exhibition. But if *Marquee* immediately invoked film, or the filmic imaginary, as the key to a reading of the artist's work, this was no ordinary cinema. The lighted signage at the entrance bore no movie titles; instead, neither quite a readymade nor an autonomous piece of sculpture, it signaled the shifting state of the "scenario" within. When its lightbulbs flashed, the gallery was lit normally, but when they were off, the space inside was dark and a film was projected. Each visitor was thus summoned as several spectators at once: filmgoer, viewer of an exhibition, and—potentially—actor within some strange new hybrid of fiction and reality.

Something of that slippage was imposed by the drama of the space itself. The gallery where the exhibition was situated is at street level, with floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides looking out on the city. Gradually one noticed that street noise was being transmitted into the

space, drawing attention from the works inside and toward the ever-changing urban landscape, itself become a kind of immersive movie, the glass windows turned into transparent screens. But then, every twenty minutes or so, automated blinds descended and the glass box became a cinema. In the darkness, on a wall that had seemed blank, a screenprint in phosphorescent ink became visible, depicting the silhouettes of children holding up what look like placards. At the same time, the film, *June 8, 1968*, 2009, commenced, projected onto a huge screen. Visitors could sit on the floor and watch, or walk around in the dim gallery, coming and going as they liked.

The opening shots of *June 8, 1968*, filmed in sumptuous 70 mm, show wooden railroad ties blurring one into the next. We are on a train, moving through sunny woods and past grassy hills, as onlookers by the side of the tracks watch the locomotive go by. They have stopped whatever they are doing and stand staring into the camera. Our gazes meet as they regard us from the screen and we look back at them from our position in the gallery. Over the course of eight minutes, the film alternates shots of landscape and city; the only sounds are the clanking of the train over the right-of-way, an occasional piercing blast from its air horn, and the wind rustling through the long grass on the hillsides. The film's title refers to the day that Robert Kennedy's coffin was transported from New York to Washington, DC, just after his assassination, a journey that is evoked rather than depicted here—Parreno having used actors and filmed in California rather than the actual locations on the East Coast. There is a sense of temporal dislocation, as if past and present were superimposed: The cars and costumes date from around four decades ago, but no attempt has been made to disguise the contemporaneity of the setting, so that the cultural trauma of the late '60s seems to haunt our twenty-first-century surroundings.

This film is the focal point of a paradoxical retrospective of an artist who has never been interested in creating

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This page, left: View of "Philippe Parreno," 2009, Centre Pompidou, Paris. Ceiling: *Speech Bubbles*, 2009. Floor: *31 Janvier 1977*, 2009. Projection: *June 8, 1968*, 2009. Right: View of "Philippe Parreno," 2009, Centre Pompidou, Paris. Foreground: *Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year It's an Artwork and in December It's Christmas (October)*, 2008. Ceiling: *Speech Bubbles*, 2009. Floor: *31 Janvier 1977*, 2009. Opposite page, from left: Philippe Parreno, *Parade? (detail)*, 2009, painted leather and plastic-rod shadow puppets, dimensions variable. View of "Philippe Parreno," 2009, Centre Pompidou, Paris. Ceiling: *Speech Bubbles*, 2009. Floor: *31 Janvier 1977*, 2009. Background, from left: *No More Reality (End)*, 1993/2009; *Parade?*, 2009.

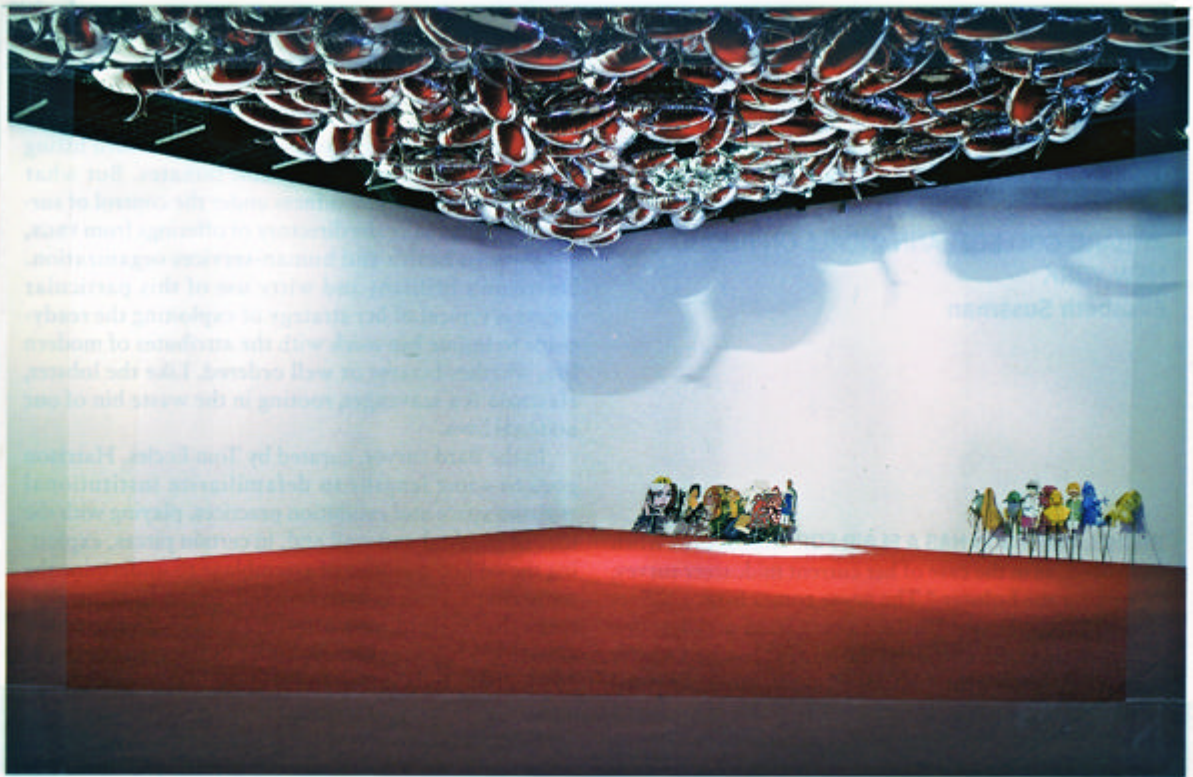
objects meant to last. In fact, the Pompidou exhibition was only one episode from what was conceived to be a series of comprehensive exhibitions, the first of which took place over the summer at the Kunsthalle Zürich; others are scheduled for this fall at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and this coming spring at the Hessel Museum of Art and CCS Galleries at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. The Zurich show was structured according to a temporality of delay, each room preceded by a marquee that seemed to promise visual satisfaction within, where one actually discovered largely empty galleries. Gratification was withheld until the final space, where Parreno's short film *The Boy from Mars*, 2003, about the construction of a makeshift cinema in Southeast Asia, was screened at regular intervals. Temporal transience is complemented by spatial dispersion in these far-flung exhibitions. At the Pompidou, the

Parreno's survey doesn't record a revolution, but it does ask what a noncoercive collectivity might look like today.

few additional works assembled in the gallery seemed to emphasize that sense of the transient: Parreno's *Speech Bubbles*, 2009, helium-filled balloons in the shape of empty cartoon bubbles, hovered on the ceiling; a Christmas tree made of cast aluminum (*Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year It's an Artwork and in December It's Christmas (October)*, 2008) stood alone in the immense expanse of the room.

Yet an exhibition that at first glance looked to be virtually devoid of objects was actually closer to an exhibition as an object; the works only became active and meaningful in particular constellations, for concrete durations. *June 8, 1968* suggests what Parreno was after, if only elliptically: The film reminds us of the hundreds of

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thousands of Americans who lined the tracks on that date to watch Kennedy's cortege pass by; more specifically, it reminds us of the photojournalist Paul Fusco, who took a series of remarkable photographs of the mourners from a train window. Kennedy's coffin had been placed on chairs in the observation car, so that people could see it as the train passed, and it was almost as if Fusco adopted the point of view of the dead man to take his photos. Parreno does the same in his film, only this time the farmers, workers, baseball players, old folks, young women—each caught staring directly into the camera while appearing simultaneously frozen in the deepest meditation, filled with private emotion—are playing roles, just as we are. The eight hours of the journey from New York to Washington becomes the time of a spectral collective, an ephemeral, spontaneous gathering, which Parreno duplicates in miniature through the eight minutes of his film: We, too, the dispersed visitors assembled in the gallery, were united in our spectatorship, until the film ended and the blinds rose, revealing once again the present-day city and its serial crowds beyond the windows.

Such transient collectivity could be said to be the very theme of the exhibition, not only in *June 8, 1968* but also, after all, in *Fraught Times*, for what is a Christmas tree if not—for one month of the year—a point around which an intimate group coalesces? Parreno first explored this idea in the summer of 1993, when he installed a store-bought artificial tree complete with tinsel, lights, and presents in the home of collectors; *Fraught Times* was itself first exhibited at the inauguration of his London dealer Pilar Corrias's new gallery. And we should not forget that the *Speech Bubbles* above our heads were initially conceived in 1997 for union demonstrators, who could write their own demands or slogans on them. Last but not least, there was the juvenile collective constituted through a cycle of events that Parreno programmed during the course of the exhibition, under the title *Parade?*—which is also the name of a children's book filled with monsters that he pro-

duced this year with the illustrator Johan Olander. Those monsters were made into shadow puppets, leaning informally against one of the walls in the gallery, that young visitors could hold aloft like protest signs as they marched around the show. Other signs were made from images depicting works in the Pompidou's collection, ranging from a female figure taken from a Matisse painting to one of Keith Haring's radiant babies. These ludic, improvisatory "protests"—which Parreno has been organizing since 1991 under the common title *No More Reality*—were the inverse of the mournful collectivity assembled around Kennedy's funeral train: There, a shared grief was captured by the image, while here images provided rallying points for communal celebration. The Pompidou was an appropriate setting for these reflections on community, being itself an outgrowth of post-'60s aspirations to a new, participatory model of culture. Alluding to those initial hopes, Parreno's work *31 Janvier 1977, 2009*—a red

carpet that covered the gallery's floor—takes its title from the Pompidou's inauguration date, as if to recapture some of that utopian energy. But the collectivity thereby imagined cannot take shape under the sign of immediacy; in our media age, the image inevitably intercedes. In its restaging of Fusco's photos from the RFK funeral train, *June 8, 1968* invokes the precedent of the Ant Farm collective's re-creation of the Zapruder footage of John F. Kennedy's assassination, *The Eternal Frame*, 1975. That work has been a touchstone for Parreno's cohort, its impact clearly felt in the work of his colleague Pierre Huyghe, for example, but *June 8, 1968* reads almost as an homage to *The Eternal Frame's* examination of the role played by the media in constructing postmodern myth. If *The Eternal Frame* has long seemed a paradigmatic instance of the deconstruction of the filmic image, and an exploration of the complicity of historical event and media spectacle, Parreno calls our attention to the more haunting aspects of Ant Farm's performance-cum-reenactment. While he deploys the same elements of media "experience"

and collective memory as did Ant Farm, he insists that from these conditions of spectacle a genuine if momentary sharing of social space can take place. Reality is not simply alienated in the image, as Guy Debord had it; rather, the image becomes a kind of crossing point between the real and the possible. Parreno's film is a reflection on the possibility of that junction, that utopia; when a French journalist asked about the film, the artist replied: "I am trying to produce an image of this past more real than those on CNN. Over the course of one day, all the workers were united, it really was a utopian moment; I grew up with the end of that utopia."

His remarks are revealing, reminding us, first of all, that June 1968 also marked the final weeks of the massive general strike that gripped the French working class and almost brought down de Gaulle's regime. The American event, so different and so much more ambiguous in its silent, unplanned gathering of a multiracial population along the railroad tracks, nevertheless functions as a screen for the memory of that other moment when "all the workers were united." Parreno was only three years old at the time and indeed grew up in the post-utopian age we all share, when spectacle seems to have definitively distanced reality from its image. But along with other members of his generation, he has refused to take this possibility as a cause for resignation or fatalism; instead, he insists on the affective potential of our image world, on its surprising ability to move us deeply and instigate novel forms of being together. Perhaps the four-show structure of Parreno's retrospective maps the dispersed territory of such a phantom community. *June 8, 1968* doesn't record a revolution, but it does ask what a spectral, noncoercive collectivity might look like today. To move through the huge, almost empty space of his Pompidou show, as if waiting for a crowd to assemble, was to realize what a central question that has been for the artist all along. □

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