
 PHILIPPE PARRENO & HANS ULRICH OBRIST

A Polyphonic Conversation

 with CARLO RATTI and GRANT MORRISON

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: You are working simultaneously on different projects: a new venture shaped as a feature film and a series of shows acting as a retrospective.

PHILIPPE PARRENO: With ZIDANE: A 21ST CENTURY PORTRAIT (2006), Douglas [Gordon] and I made a portrait of a man in real time. This new project could be presented as another portrait—of an illegal immigrant. The film tells the story of a fictional character that at the end of the film becomes a citizen.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST is Co-director of Exhibitions and Programs and Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery, London.

CHARLES ARSÈNE-HENRY is an editor and writer based in London. In 2009 he founded the knowledge agency White Box Black Box.

CARLO RATTI is an Italian architect and engineer who practices in Torino, Italy, and teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA, where he directs the SENSEable City Laboratory.

GRANT MORRISON is a Scottish comic book writer and artist. He is best known for his nonlinear narratives and counter-cultural leanings.

HUO: The film is set in New York City. How will it reflect the city's identity? Metropolis is New York in the daytime; Gotham City is New York at night.

PP: All the signs produced by the city are beginning to threaten the boy. The city starts to speak to him. This test screen was shot in Chinatown with the Chinese illegal immigrant community.

HUO: So it becomes the portrait of a city.

PP: Yes, it could ultimately become the portrait of a city. And the story of the film could become a map—a map of the signs that the city produces on an infinite number of levels. Chinatown is a city within a city. So like in *Alice in Wonderland*, it's the role of paranoia on perception.

CARLO RATTI: In *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893) Lewis Carroll wrote: "'And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!' 'Have you used it much?' I enquired. 'It has never been spread out, yet,' replied Mein Herr. 'The farmers objected. They said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.'" During Lewis Carroll's time, digital mash-ups had not yet been invented.¹⁾ Today our physical space is becoming increasingly blanketed by layers of digital data: it is as if we were doing maps of our countries

on the scales of 10, 100, 100,000, or googols of miles to the mile.

HUO: I see several models for your forthcoming series of shows—Zurich, Paris, Dublin, New York, etc.

PP: I didn't want to conform to the specific genre of the "mid-career traveling retrospective show." The three places in question are each quite different from the others, just like the nature of the relationships I have with the directors of these institutions. And so I'm working on a very different exhibition for each space. In Zurich, the Kunsthalle has a sequence of rooms, and so we play with the doorways of these rooms, setting up a marquee over each entrance and exit. A series of marquees like the one I set up in front of the Guggenheim for "Theanyspacewhatever" show (2008–2009). These marquees are in the same spirit as the flashing museum labels or captions I'd played with earlier. No object is ever exhibited in a museum without its accompanying wall label. The marquees in this case are outgrowths; they invade the exhibition space. Like the body snatchers, the wall labels replace the object they are supposed to name. They are empty and hollow, ghostlike. In the first room, there are ventriloquist's dummies which I made with Rirkrit Tiravanija, ventriloquist's dummies of every artist with whom I have collaborated in the past. There are also the SPEECH BUBBLES (1997) I exhibited at the Venice Biennale, and SPEAKING TO THE PENGUINS (2007), an infrared photograph. So language and sound are present, but the exhibition itself is silent.

HUO: So this is Zurich? What is the score you are writing for the exhibition in Paris?

PP: In Paris, the architecture of the Centre Pompidou is made up of superposed plateaus. I wanted to rediscover this open form of architecture. And so I started to think about a show with no walls. I did get rid of all the layers of UV-blocking filter film that were covering the large bay windows, opening the space onto the street, onto the Tinguely-Saint Phalle fountain, making it possible to see the gallery from the street. Thus the first act of this restoration is to offer, in lieu of a retrospective, a journey through a space. January 31, 1977 is the date of the Centre Pompidou's opening, the space that I have enlarged. The retrospective here is a journey through a space,

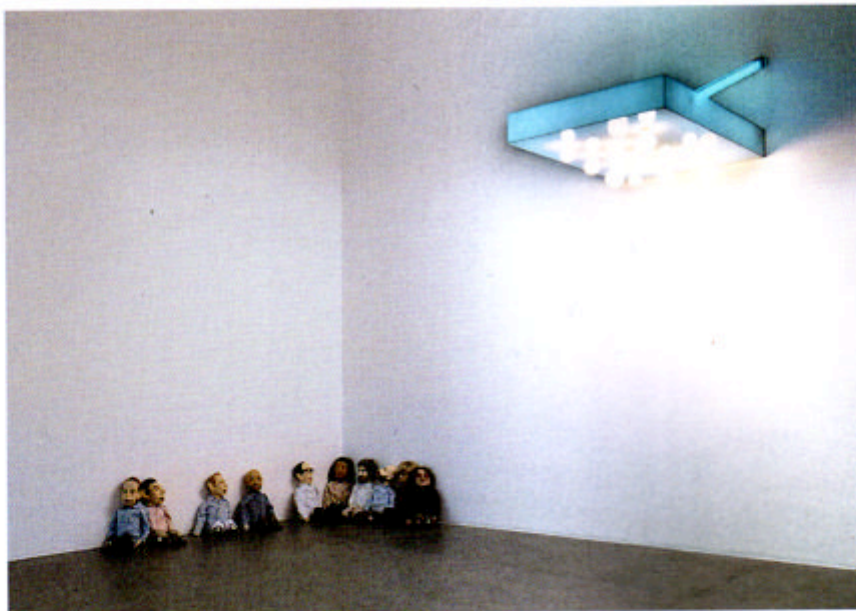
through events, objects and images. A large red moquette emphasizes the open space. There is a sixteen by forty foot screen on which a 70 mm film is projected. The projection room is visible, looking like an outgrowth of the bay windows, connected to the dramatically exposed ventilation system of the Pompidou. Curtains rise and fall. When the curtains are open, you have the feeling that you are in the street. Microphones installed outside pick up the sound of the pavement and the street to convey it inside, increasing that feeling.

The film projected is called JUNE 8, 1968 (2009): it's about seven minutes long and is a bit similar to what I did in CREDITS (2000), which was the reconstitution of an urban landscape of the 1970s. Here it's the reconstitution of an event of the late sixties. After the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968, his body was put on a train to be taken from New York to Washington. All along the way, people—most of them workers or middle-class (the mob, in other words)—gathered beside the railway to pay their lasts respects to him. It's a particular moment in history along a railway. A moment when things could have been different. These characters lined up along the side are like the living dead. And this forgotten news, filmed and projected in 70mm, comes back to haunt us. It's an image as real as the visitor of an exhibition or the person one sees strolling by when the curtains are raised.

For Bard College I would like to re-enact SNOW DANCING (1995). Do you remember it? It's a book that recounts a promotional party. Some people in a space celebrate something, but we don't know what. I would like to reconstruct the space and re-enact the party in it. It's what I'm working on now. But that could change. The Dublin show I have not decided on yet.

HUO: Can you talk more about the exhibition as a medium or "Ways Beyond Objects"?

PP: There is no object without its exhibition. Everything set off, in a way, from that precise statement, and from then on, you can add to that... I am doomed, meaning that the next project is always more interesting than the last one. I guess I'm always a bit scared of becoming a subject. Those retrospectives make you a subject, even a hysterical subject,



PHILIPPE PARRENO, *MARQUEE*, 2007, acrylic glass, neon tubes, light bulbs, 55 1/4 x 39 1/4 x 25 1/2",
 exhibition view "May," Kunsthalle Zürich / *VORDACH*, Acrylglas, Neonröhren, Glühbirnen, 140 x 100 x 65 cm, Ausstellungsansicht |
 PHILIPPE PARRENO and RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, *PUPPETS*, 2009, mixed media, length: 29 1/2 - 34 1/2" /
PUPPEN, verschiedene Materialien, Länge: 75 - 87 cm. (PHOTO: STEFAN ALTENBURGER, ZÜRICH)

don't you think? Remember that statement by Pierre Boulez: "Is the work, such as we know it, a veritable whole, or is it not instead the time-limited fragment of a vaster, unfinished project without which, however, this fragment could never have existed and given the illusion of the whole?"²⁰

HUO: What are you reading at the moment?

PP: Right now, I'm reading books about magic—white magic but also illusionism. I'm serious. Magic used to be referred to as "the art." As Allan Moore said, art is like magic, the science of manipulating symbols, words, or images to achieve changes of consciousness.

GRANT MORRISON: The sigil is a symbolic form which condenses a desire into a glyph. What the magician does is write out a desire, say, "It is my desire to meet the most beautiful woman on earth." And then he breaks that desire down until it becomes letters squashed together and it becomes a little hieroglyph, a sign, which he then forgets the original meaning of, and charges up by either masturbating or sitting in a graveyard at night or anything that allows him

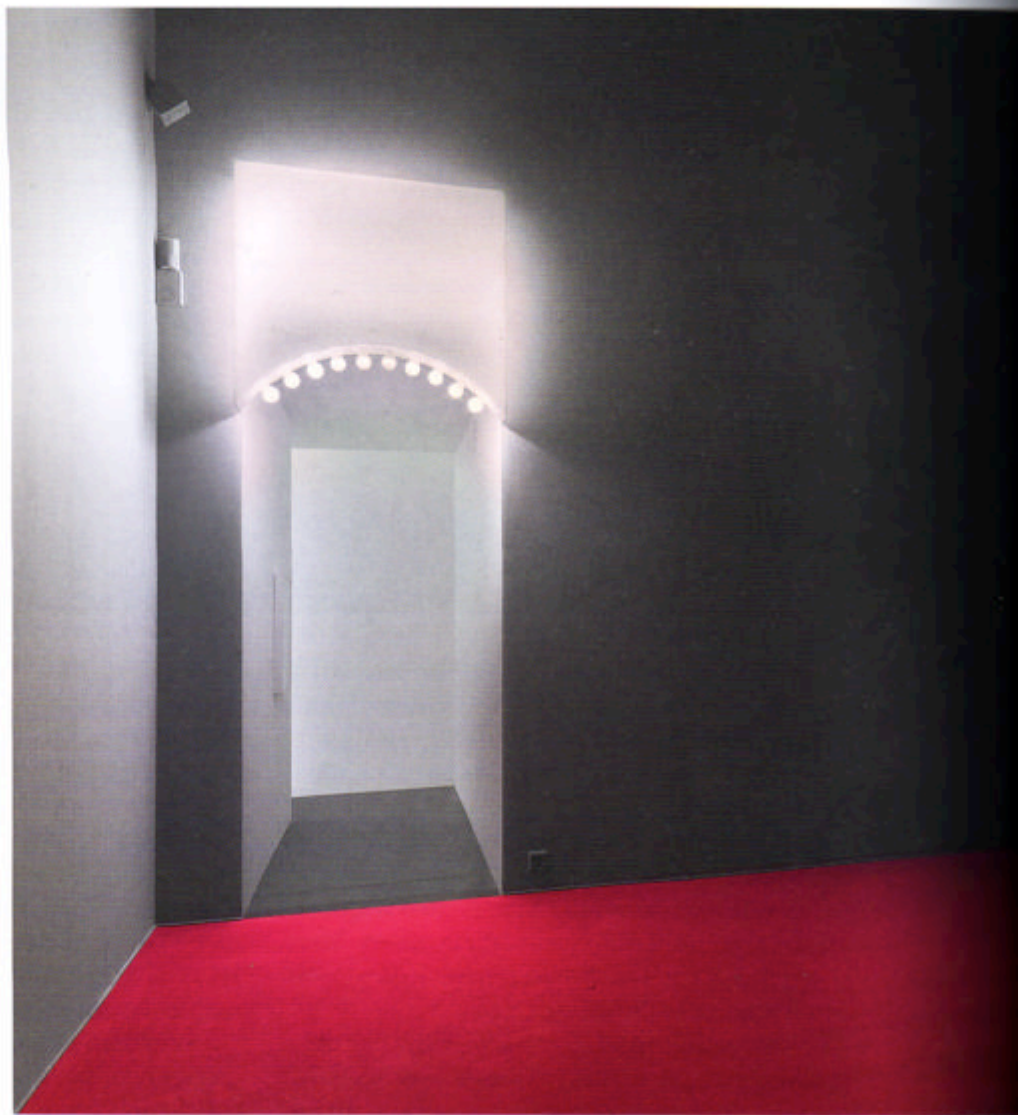
to stop his mind for a second and project the idea of the sigil. It's a way of taking desire and crushing it down into something that only represents desire but no longer describes it.

HUO: It has been two years since you and I co-curated the opera, *IL TEMPO DEL POSTINO* (July, 2007). Looking back at it—even after doing it again in Basel this year—it has a strange significance: it was both a celebration of something we've been doing for a very long time and also an end to a chapter—and a new beginning.

PP: I still like this project a lot because, in many ways, it summarized a lot of our ideas about exhibition as a coherent object, about time-based object, object without boundaries, about group show as a collective... But it also has to do with desire, and the articulation of desires.

HUO: *IL TEMPO DEL POSTINO* is dedicated to our friend, the late English architect Cedric Price, who has been one of architecture's most influential figures since the founding of his office in London in 1960. None of the artists invited to be in this show

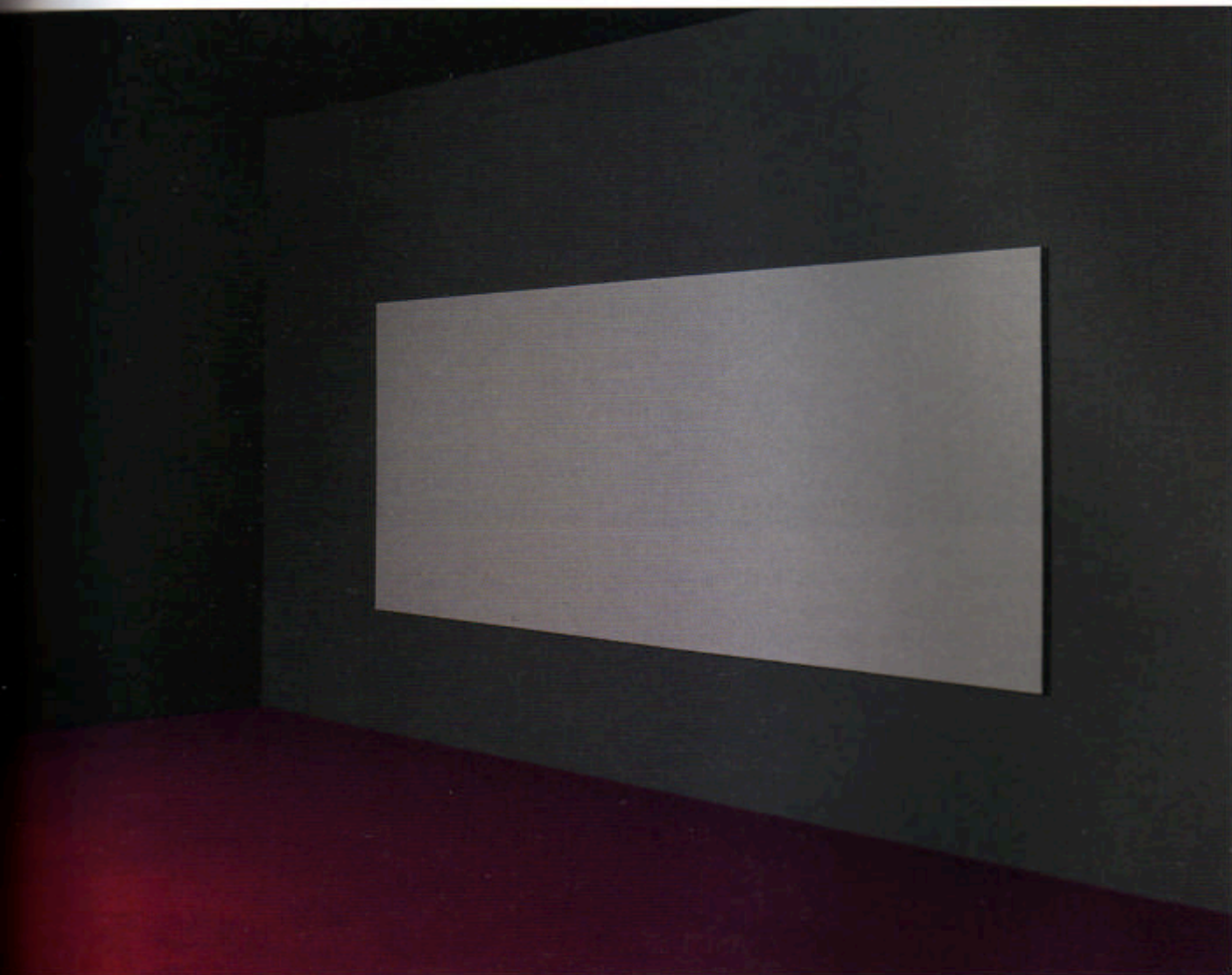
PHILIPPE PARRENO, MARQUEE, 2009, acrylic glass, neon tubes, light bulbs, 43 1/4 x 47 1/4 x 7; exhibition view "May," Kunsthalle Zürich / VORDACH, Acrylglass, Neonröhren, Glühbirnen, 110 x 120 x 18 cm. (PHOTO: STEFAN ALTENBURGER, ZÜRICH)



had been born when he started working on the Fun Palace (1960–61), a trans-disciplinary multi-purpose complex for theater and cultural projects. An event like IL TEMPO DEL POSTINO would have been hosted in such a structure. His focus on time-based buildings that would disappear after a limited lifespan, rather than on finished buildings, made him legendary. He was convinced that buildings should be flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the moment. This reflects his belief that time is the fourth dimension of design. The Fun Palace was supposed to be a flexible structure in a large mechanistic shipyard on which,

depending on changing situations, many structures could be built from above. "It will probably look like nothing on earth from the outside," it was said.

PP: You could also call IL TEMPO DEL POSTINO a time-based exhibition. Artists are invited to propose an art piece, a tableau, so to speak, that will be visible only for a limited moment. It is a collection of time-based works. We can see IL TEMPO DEL POSTINO as an experiment in time coding. In *The Futurological Congress* (1971) Stanislaw Lem describes the future as "a peripatetic vision of knowledge formation in which global constituencies converge and disperse, at once sha-



ring information and developing new models of post-symbolic communication." IL TEMPO DEL POSTINO is Italian for "Postman's Time." Postman means two different things in French: *facteur* is factor, like for a mathematical operation or a computer programming language, but *facteur* also means postman. And a postman is a person who delivers information. So here we go. This is a proposal to visit an exhibition space without moving—a journey through a museum without moving. The artists each appear next to each other, rather than with each other, according to an old idea of time sharing, but they nevertheless still

constitute a subject—raising once more the question of the collective, a polyphony of voices as one subject.

Edited by Charles Arsène-Henry

(Translation: Stephen Sartarelli)

1) Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, London and New York: Macmillan and Co., 1893, p. 169.

2) Pierre Boulez, *Leçons de Musique*, Points de Repère, III (Paris: Christian Bourgeois Éditeur, 2005), p. 671.



PHILIPPE PARRENO, *SPEECH BUBBLES*, 2009, chrome Mylar balloons, helium; 31 JANVIER 1977, 2009, red carpet Balsan "Best" (color 580), variable dimensions; *FRAUGHT TIMES: FOR ELEVEN MONTHS OF THE YEAR IT'S AN ARTWORK AND IN DECEMBER, IT'S CHRISTMAS (OCTOBER)*, 2008, cast aluminum, paint, exhibition view "8 juin 1968–7 septembre 2009," Centre Pompidou, Paris / *SPRECHBLASEN*, Chrom-Mylar-Balloons, Helium, 31. JANUAR 1977, roter Teppich, Masse variabel; *ANGESPANNTE ZEITEN: ELF MONATE IM JAHR IST ES EIN KUNSTWERK UND IM DEZEMBER, WEIHNACHTEN (OKTOBER)*, gegossenes Aluminium, Farbe, Ausstellungsansicht.



PHILIPPE PARRENO, *JUNE 8, 1968*, 2009, 70 mm film, approx. 8 min; "8 juin 1968 – 7 septembre 2009," exhibition view Centre Pompidou, Paris / *8. JUNI*, 1968, 70-mm-Film, ca. 8 Min.