

# philippe parreno

DUST

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PHILIPPE PARRENO, NO MORE REALITY, 1997. Children demonstrate in a shopping zone, Barcelona, elementary school, Paris.

Philippe Parreno suffers from a dust allergy. Dust is a general name for minute solid particles with diameters less than 500 micrometers. Allergy, a disorder of the immune system, is a form of hypersensitivity characterized by excessive activation of certain white blood cells resulting in an extreme inflammatory response. In some people, Parreno among them, severe allergies may result in life-threatening reactions and potentially death. Silently, dust piles up everywhere. The surroundings must be cleaned continuously. It is a tough fight against the clock, against everything that is not new and unsullied. Against the seduction of the past? For Parreno, the past is deadly. In the future, he optimistically seems to believe, there will perhaps be no past. Then he could be saved.

If the future existed in a concrete sense as something that could be discerned by a hyper-developed brain, we wouldn't be so seduced by the past. But the future, says Vladimir Nabokov, has no such reality.<sup>1</sup> It is but a specter of thought. Probably Parreno, in lucid moments, sees things in a similar way, and yet this specter of thought-futurity haunts much of his work and sometimes gains an unusual solidity. A window opens up, and the future is there, strangely visible before our eyes. This, it seems to us, is what happens in *El sueño de una cosa* (*The Dream of a Thing*, 2001). *The Dream of a Thing*, says Parreno, "is a game that produces new stories each time it is played; these are the stories of a film in a permanent pre-production stage."<sup>2</sup> It's been aired in the movie theaters of Sweden, inserted in the middle of a series of advertisements appearing prior to the films. Its second

showing took place in an art context. Parreno describes it thus: "A fake copy of [Robert] Rauschenberg's *White Painting* was visible for four minutes and thirty-three seconds—the time that John Cage's *Silence* lasts (4'33", 1952)—the score that Cage composed in response to this Rauschenberg painting—and in my exhibition, at the end of four minutes and thirty-three seconds, like in a haunted house, the lights went off, the blinds fell and the film was projected. The exhibition is a haunted house. The title of the project . . . designs a film, which, like a recurring dream, is never the same each time it is seen!"<sup>3</sup> What we obtain in the darkness is nothing less than a glimpse of the future, a moment of visibility not yet integrated into a narrative and thus unburdened by history, experience, and meaning—sixty seconds of a future form of life and, it would seem, of a different sense of chronology, evolution, and causality.<sup>4</sup>

"The search for personal liberty is becoming more and more synonymous with a quest for the non-narrative," says Parreno, and adds that "the time ought to be taken to develop this. But in the eventuality of a total absence of narrative, fantastic stories are always there to fill the void."<sup>5</sup> In *El sueño de una cosa*, the fantastic story is one of anomalous growth and strangely synthetic vegetation. Surely the scene is not taking place here and now; it's all in some other place and in some radically different time, yet it seems undeniably and overwhelmingly present. The beginning of Edgar Varèse's 1954 electronic work *Déserts*, often described as the music of expectation, amplifies the anticipatory quality and the sense of arrival throughout Parreno's piece. But an arrival of what? The scenery of the film is also the territory of expectation, a transparent desert where the vegetation develops according to its own peculiar chronology. "The images, taken in the paleness of a midnight sun, have been filmed in 35mm to keep," according to Parreno, the "quality of immanence, of presence."<sup>6</sup> The film has been compared to a NASA programmer's diagrams of future maneuvers in outer space: a kind of rehearsal taking place, not in real time, but in some tense as yet unheard of. "When it turns to science fiction, cinema closes its eyes and moves into a rich and uneasy sleep," writes J. G. Ballard.<sup>7</sup> That is not what happens in Parreno's film. This is not science and not fiction, and we are all wholly awake and attentive. Our brains, it would seem, have been liberated from the Euclidean coordinates, and can now process images and sounds of a radically different order. Perhaps this art of the future no longer can be understood in terms of an organic brain but instead forces us to invoke new devices. "The programming for Parreno does not have to do with the brain," says Stéphanie Moïsdon, "but with the machine (human and sentimental), with an art of the future at loggerheads with the science as well as the fiction."<sup>8</sup>

Parreno has little in common with those artists who find inspiration in obsolete technologies and outmoded means of communication. His is an art of anticipation and emergence. If others travel through the labyrinths of pastness and explore the mind as a memory machine, Parreno instead devotes himself to things to come.

Consequently, Parreno's notion of subjectivity, if that is still the relevant term, is unusual. In fact, it seems to us that Parreno's work represents a great challenge because of its total lack of retrospection. Like no other artist, Parreno forces us to rethink the notions of emergence and arrival. All notions of subjective depth and perceptual thickness, dependent as they are on established concepts of interiority as capsules of pastness, seem inadequate when encountering his work. A theory of a subject that constructs itself in relationship to the future, rather than through modes of *Erinnerung* (remembrance), requires an entirely novel architecture of time that puts emphasis on the subject's anticipatory drive and openness to a variety of futures.

(Architectures of the future: Parreno's and architect François Roche's collaborative *Battery House* (2003), a hall for large gatherings and a kind of biotechnology-driven hyper-plug that will solve the electricity problem at the Thai artist commune The Land, certainly testifies to a futurist predisposition. Built as an unusual film set for Parreno's *The Boy from Mars* (2005), the eccentric-looking building is powered by animals (local buffalos) and seems to us to represent a break with the traditional organism/artifact distinction. This building "breathes and perspires, something between Clement Adler's early bat-winged airplane and a Spielberg pterodactyl,"<sup>9</sup> according to Roche who, in a brief essay, spells out the functioning of the *Battery House* and its intimate cooperation with humans and animals.)

"Today there are no longer images that are beautiful, there are chains of images."<sup>10</sup> This somehow cryptic, yet succinct, statement is a starting point for a preliminary grasp of Parreno's artistic practice. In Parreno's artistic vocabulary, the chain is the dynamic structure that leads to the production of forms. In the making of a work (be it a film, a building, or an exhibition), it is the process that links preproduction to production and postproduction. All too often, the narrative is narrowed down to one of these aspects, Parreno explains, "What I mean . . . by chain . . . is a dynamic structure that produces forms: pre-production, production, post-production; these narrative instances depend upon each other. In the course of the chaining of these sequences, a narrative unfolds."<sup>11</sup> In some ways, there are no objects left. And the images are scarce as well, though, through the metaphor of the chain, it is possible to rearticulate, or to connect, the different projects Parreno has produced since the early nineties with current ones. From

*Mont Analogue* (2001), a project based on René Daumal's eponymous book, the film rights of which were temporarily acquired by Parreno, to *El sueño de una cosa*, shot as part of a pseudoscientific expedition, most of Parreno's projects or propositions address these issues in different ways, via different angles and hypotheses. Bruno Latour speaks about an experimental anthropological expedition of uncertainty.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, an expedition of expectation driven by anticipatory desire. His dust allergy prevents Parreno from remaining in the past.

\*Cosmic dust is widely present in space, where gas and dust clouds are primary precursors for planetary systems. The zodiacal light, seen in the sky on a dark night, is produced by sunlight reflected from particles of dust in orbit around the sun. The tails of comets are produced by emissions of dust and ionized gas from the bodies of the comets. Dust also covers solid planetary bodies, and vast dust storms can occur on Mars that can cover almost the entire planet. Interstellar dust is found between the stars, and high concentrations can produce diffuse nebulae and reflection nebulae. Dust samples returned from outer space could provide information about conditions in the early solar system. With their help we might be able to see to future. Several spacecraft have been launched in an attempt to gather samples of dust and other materials. Among these was Stardust, which flew past Comet Wild 2 in 2004 and returned a capsule of the comet's remains to Earth in January 2006. The Japanese Hayabusa spacecraft is currently on a mission to collect samples of dust from the surface of an asteroid.

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Parreno's art stems from a promiscuity of collaborations—with artists, curators, scientists, filmmakers, writers, and academics, to name only some of the most obvious departure points. It is an art about the complex layers of how our reality is structured and how we understand these very layers. Some of Parreno's most notable contributions include:

- The invention of "snaking" with Pierre Joseph in 1992.<sup>13</sup>
- The publication of *Snow Dancing* in 1995, a book by Parreno as told to Liam Gillick and Jack Wendler. The book describes a building, a group of visitors within that building, and propositions for several activities; it is both a scenario and commentary of an event that may or may not take place. The

mysterious reality of these events was compounded when, in his eponymous contribution to an exhibition at Le Consortium, Dijon, Parreno invited several hundred people for an event in the art center that simulated the aesthetics of a party (perhaps the same party described in Parreno's publication).

- *Vicinato* (1995): Parreno, Carsten Höller, and Rirkrit Tiravanija produce a film based upon a conversation that they had with each other. The conversation, which was recorded, was later modified so that each actor would say the same number of words. The conversations are not assigned so that each actor represents one artist; rather they are arranged along a temporal sequence. Like a Deleuzian root, there is no real beginning, nor a real ending, thereby making *Vicinato* an excerpt of a longer conversation, one that is to be followed. The shooting was made on 16mm black-and-white film, based on the style of Michelangelo Antonioni's films from the sixties. The location was a roof in Milan. It is a story subsumed to a regulated sequence and layered with the baggage of avant-garde cinema.
- The recurring *Speech Bubbles* installation (beginning in 1997) that is composed of Mylar balloons and recalls an emptied version of Andy Warhol's classic silver balloon room (*Silver Clouds*, 1966). The installation manifests the murky grey area where private and public thoughts meet, where communication is both open and impossible.
- *Alien Seasons*: Parreno's mid-career retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris/ARC in 2002, unfolds not as a standard retrospective (presenting an archive of work in an orderly fashion) but as an engagement with the parameters of exhibition-making itself. Wall labels are subtly illuminated, lights flicker in the galleries, and artworks gain new meaning.
- *Briannnnnn & Ferryyyyyy* (2004), with Liam Gillick, which presents itself as a classic cat-and-mouse game in which the subject of debate is art's relationship with intellectual property law—how the distribution and circulation of creative content is governed and what this means. These reflections are delivered through ten cartoon shorts that act at once as critical apparatus (providing a basis for academic musings on IP law) and de facto artworks (thereby reinforcing the blurred line between work and critique).

- The invention of "architecture fiction" with *The Boy From Mars* (2005), a story about a cryptic architecture in a Thai field at an unknown point in time.
- *Zidane, a 21st century portrait* (2006): a feature-length film in which Parreno and Douglas Gordon reinvent our understanding of one of the world's most famous athletes, Zinédine Zidane. Through a moving-image portrait, recorded in *real-time* during a *Real Madrid* soccer match (against *Villarreal*), the artists capture a star as never seen before, forging a singular document on the construction of a media persona and the context of his theater. With eerie effect, the film concludes with Zidane getting ejected from the game with a red card, foreshadowing his similar plight in France's World Cup final against Italy later that summer.
- Making ventriloquism a de facto current of contemporary artistic practice (e.g., *The Ultrasonic Scream of the Squirrel*, 2006). On numerous occasions, the artist has used ventriloquists to speak for him and on behalf of others. This interest, which also surfaces with his *Speech Bubbles*, relates to the artist's fascination with our understanding of reality, fact versus fiction, and to the loaded meanings of truth, subjectivity, and magic.

NOTES

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (1972; New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 1.
  2. Philippe Parreno, *philippe parreno: alien affection*, exh. cat. (Paris: Paris Musées; Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 331.
  3. Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Philippe Parreno* (Cologne: Walther König, 2008), p. 33. Translations by Will Bishop.
  4. *El sueño de una cosa* consists of a sixty-second film, the white panels on which the film is projected, and the silence of four minutes, thirty-three seconds that follows it before the film starts again. The film shows postcard views of a Norwegian hillside set to the music of French composer Edgar Varèse. The white panels are a replica of Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting* (1951). When shown in a gallery context, the work is accompanied by a glow-in-the-dark label providing the title.
  5. Parreno, quoted in Stéphanie Moïsson, "White Nova," in *Turbulenz: Protikus Projekte 2001–2004*, ed. Jochen Volz (Frankfurt: Portikus, 2004), p. 19.
  6. Moïsson, p. 17.
  7. J. G. Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Picador, 1997), p. 17.
  8. Moïsson, p. 17.
  9. François Roche, "Hybrid Muscle," in *philippe parreno: alien affection*, p. 374.
  10. Parreno, quoted in Obrist, p. 13.
  11. *Ibid.*
  12. See *philippe parreno: alien affection*, p. 8.
  13. See Michael Archer, "Material Fantasies," in this catalogue.
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