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ART
WEBEXCLUSIVE INCONVERSATION

PHILIPPE PARRENO with Charles Eppley

by Charles Eppley

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Exhibition view of *Philippe Parreno: La levadura y el anfitrión*, Museo Jumex, Mexico City, 2017.

I initially encountered the enigmatic artworks of Philippe Parreno (b. 1964) as a first-year graduate student of contemporary art history at Stony Brook University. His video piece *Anywhere Out of the World* (2000)—part of a collaboration with Pierre Huyghe (b. 1962), wherein the artists together purchased, distributed, and enlivened a stock manga character, Annlee, through digital, cinematic, and other means—was emblematic of a contemporary moving-image practice situated between formats and ideologies, as well as divergent modes of analog and digital representation and spectatorship. Parreno's work is often contextualized in the frames of cinema and theater, and a convergence of the "black box" with the "white cube" through large-scale video environments and architectural installations. As a burgeoning scholar of sound and new media art, I was drawn to his hybridized media forms, particularly as they challenged and expanded visual regimes of museum spectatorship.

Parreno's conceptual works, at some times playful and wryly imaginative, at others, deeply personal or carefully detached, are infamously distributed across formal and institutional boundaries. His stylistically inclusive and structurally permutational mode of art-making is based on a repurposing of forms and an acute sense of self-awareness. Representative of the diffuse, likely impossible-to-define, paradigm of "contemporary practice," Parreno's work has come to symbolize a broader transformation of the artist into something—anything—other than a maker of objects. In the past, Parreno has referred to himself as less an object maker than an exhibition producer, a view from which this interview begins, but which is set aside to explore other topics such as yeast colonies, puppeteers, music,

disease, recuperation, automatons, and cephalopods. Our discussion was initiated around two of Parreno's most recent exhibitions—*The Yeast and the Host* at the Museo Jumex in Mexico City, and *The Marquis and the Sisters* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis—and conducted on a brisk December morning in New York City.

Charles Eppley (Rail): I know that you've done a lot of interviews recently, and I don't want to retread too much of that territory. I'd rather just have a conversation about what you've been doing recently. You have an upcoming exhibition at the Museo Jumex, which is your first in Mexico, and another at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis. I believe that you also have an upcoming exhibition in Berlin as well?

Philippe Parreno: Yeah, in Berlin at the Martin-Gropius-Bau Museum, at the end of May.

Rail: I was actually in Mexico City at the time of the Museo Jumex opening, but wasn't able to go. I was on vacation. Perhaps instead of going through the whole spiel about how your medium is the *exhibition apparatus*—you know, that's been done in other interviews, why don't we just get into it and talk about what you've done in Mexico.

Parreno: The Museo Jumex exhibition is called *La levadura y el anfitrión (The Yeast and The Host)*. It's sort of an attempt to create a weird dialogue between a microorganism and a human person. I started to do something a bit like this in China this summer at the Rockbund Art Museum. The idea is to run the timeline of the show—the order and

appearances of events in the space—not through a machine, but through a weird interaction between a yeast-like life that lives in a bioreactor and a host, or a person hosting the visitors and playing piano and deciding to play visual sequences. The dialogue produces something that is, well, it's not like a John Cage chance thing, but it's more of a *non-periodic loop*, you know? The events are determined by chance, but they will never repeat themselves.

Rail: The concept of *non-periodicity* reminds me of writings on music by the French composer Pierre Boulez, who I know that you have read—

Parreno: I have read Boulez, yeah.

Rail: It's a phrase that Boulez used to describe his own piano music. The piano is a trope in your work, within both the films and installations, such as in *H {N)Y P N(Y} OSIS* (2015) at the Park Avenue Armory. In that work, some of the piano material had that very *non-periodic* quality—when nothing is repeated, only continuing.

Exhibition view of *Philippe Parreno: La levadura y el anfitrión*, Museo Jumex, Mexico City, 2017

Parreno: Yes, absolutely, Boulez was a super big influence. You know, Boulez classically made some pieces, where just to turn the page of the score, it was an influence on the way you play the music. So, yes, the structure of *The Yeast and The Host* has to do with that, but it's the first time that I have really used a player. I thought about it many times, through a metaphor of the *dhalang*—you know the *dhalang*?
The *dhalang* is a performer in Indonesian opera, a person who is literally hosting an audience, but also plays a puppet show, manipulates a puppet, is a puppeteer. He's also the guy who produces the voice, and is the conductor of the orchestra, the ensemble of instruments. I have always been fascinated by this kind of character—he's sort of interesting. I

thought about this when I did the exhibition *Anywhen* (2016–17) at Tate already. Maybe the show should be run by such players, so to speak. I don't know what to call them—hosts, in the case of Museo Jumex; puppeteer? The player of the show?

Rail: Is a visitor a player?

Parreno: No. In *The Yeast and the Host*, the host is a woman who plays the piano, changes the sequence of events, takes care of the yeast, receives information from the yeast which is analyzed by a computer, or perhaps decides not to incorporate that information. She also literally gives visitors texts to read because some films are translated into Spanish. There is also a balloon fish flying around, so that has to be refilled with helium. The host is taking care of the show and changing the sequence of events with the yeast. That kind of structure is new to me, you know, and I wish to develop that aspect of my work more.

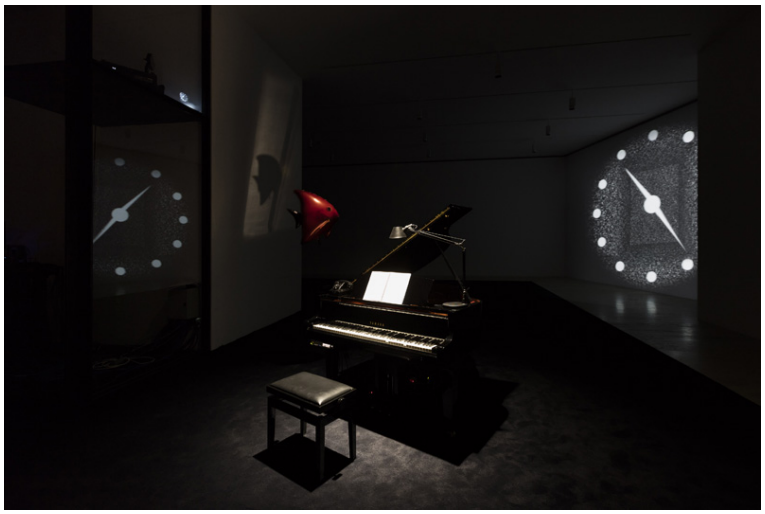
Rail: It's super interesting to think about your exhibitions as an ensemble, not so much *performance* but as a *situation*—a process unfolding in real time. It is striking to me that you use musical metaphors throughout your work, nearly everything. To insert a character such as this host, a sort of *dhalang*, who is something of a conductor, but not so much a conductor—a helper, assistant, someone managing the opera, the system—emphasizes that metaphor. In this exhibition, the host works in accordance with the yeast, which is a living organism. What exactly is the yeast doing?

Parreno: The yeast is actually sort of a clock. The way that the yeast sees time, perceives time, they are able to send information about their own biological timeline. This timeline is basically used as the timeline of the exhibition. The yeast sends information to the host saying, for example, "Now is the time to play this film," and the host may decide to do so or not. But of course the yeast can make mistakes, so it's kind of like—it's really to go down the line, to try to do something with chance without using any algorithm. So the small decision-making processes between the two human beings and a nonhuman being, it's a game. I am fascinated by some of the exhibitions by John Cage, where literally every day things move and change, pieces are taken from different parts of the museum, according to choices of the participants. My exhibition is not so far off from an attempt like that to produce something that is, you know, *quasi-alive* in a way. The decision-making process is there for the visitors to see. It's also the case for the piano players, who have a few pieces that I selected for them—they are getting better at performing the compositions throughout the exhibition.

Rail: Do you have *player pianos* in addition to *piano players*—live humans?

Parreno: Yeah. They are doing both. In the beginning, they were practicing and hesitating to play certain pieces, and I know now that they are more alert, so the show also evolves through time. Obviously, this is new for me—a new dimension.

Rail: The Museo Jumex exhibition is not retrospective—



Exhibition view of *Philippe Parreno: La levadura y el anfitrión*, Museo Jumex, Mexico City, 2017.

Parreno: No.

Rail: But it is your first show in Mexico, and it includes many forms that you've used in past exhibitions. It's interesting to me that you've inserted past forms into this new system, which is bound to the ecology of the Museo Jumex and what you've created there.

Parreno: Yeah.

Rail: With regards to the concept of *chance*, it seems that it may be *randomness*that you are seeking—specifically, human-mediated randomness. I would like to hear more about your piece*, With a Rhythmic Instinction to be Able to Travel Beyond Existing Forces of Life* (2014), which explores this notion and was recently exhibited at *Dreamlands* (2016) at the Whitney and at the 2016 Gwangju Biennale.

Parreno: The fireflies piece?

Rail: Right. The firefly is also a living creature and—

Parreno: An automaton.

Rail: In this piece, you're dealing with a computational form—influenced by the British mathematician John Horton Conway, I believe?

Parreno: Conway's *Game of Life* (1970), which is a cellular automaton.

Exhibition view of *All the World's Futures* at the 56th Venice Biennale, 2015. Philippe Parreno, *With a Rhythmic Instinction to be Able to Travel Beyond Existing Forces of Life (Green + White)*, 2014. Outdoor LED Display, 400 centimeters x 240 centimeters

Rail: From this you explore computational randomness and repetition, which are recurring themes in your work. There are three aspects to this work: *the human, the nonhuman,* and *the system*, let's say. Could you say more about this piece?

Parreno: Yeah, it's really, the way I see it, an automaton, you know? So, I did not preconceive the piece. I didn't start by saying, "Okay, I am going to make an automaton." I started to make drawings of fireflies for a couple of years, a lot of them. I did that because I was sick, and I had to go through all of the treatments and, you know, was drawing to kill time. I started to draw fireflies over and over, and it became a game to me. Fireflies are these fascinating creatures. I've been fascinated by a text from years ago by Pier Paolo Pasolini called "The Disappearance of the

Fireflies," a beautiful text from 1975. I have always been fascinated by this creature, so I started to draw and draw and draw—after a while, I started to give them away. So, it became a piece.

Rail: You gave the drawings away?

Parreno: Yeah, for me it was a way to be alive. I keep drawing them and, they were like angels or demons. It seems to be a good luck charm or whatever. I started to give them away. It became a sort of a potlatch. We scan them to keep—

Rail: Before you gave them away?

Parreno: Yeah, just to remember them, you know? Then later looking at the scans, scrolling down the folder I was looking at the movements the series produced like a flip book: "Oh interesting, this could be the base for an animation." But I didn't want to animate it myself, like how you make a cartoon, so in parallel, I used Game of Life as a kind of protocol. I thought it would be interesting to use both—typically, in cinema, you have the film, and next to it you have the magnetic tape, the track—

Rail: Audio.

Parreno: Yes, the track on which you can put a sound. In this work, that space is reserved for this the Game of Life protocol, a computer protocol where life can be generated, honestly, life and death—une *danse macabre*. We started to say, "Okay, simple algorithm: when the computer picks up

one picture with wings of the fireflies closed, the next should be open, really simple." And then we play the protocol, and things start to live and die.

Rail: The protocol is visualized in the lower register of the piece?

Parreno: Yeah, a small kind of chart, in a way. The automatic form is quite interesting; it is a *chain of thought*s or events that leads eventually to the production of a form. It was never planned.

Rail: Not the production of noise?

Parreno: No. What I mean is that there is no plan. It's by doing that you happen to find a new thing, but there's no preconception. So it's just like a chain of circumstances. The *danse macabre* was also for me a way to play with the cancer, a way to get out from that life and death game. At the end, it became a joyful journey—a ritual to conjure a disease.

Rail: It seems like a very personal piece, obviously...

Parreno: Quite personal.

Rail: Similar to many of your other works. The images—or *forms*—that you use, such as telephones, pianos, light bulbs, are things that are habituated in human life and culture. Everyone has their personal interactions with these forms and their meanings.

Parreno: Memories.

Rail: Yeah, memories. The fireflies piece stuck out to me, however, because it seems atypical, thematically and formally.

Parreno: I did another work around "The Disappearance of Fireflies" at the Villa Arson in Nice, France, in the 1990s. It was a show called *No Man's Time*. That was the first time I used fireflies motif. I connected a little series of LED lights to electrical wires and put it into a bush in the art center's park, it was a summer show. It was a piece that was impossible to see, unless of course it was at night, but at night the show was closed, and the park was closed. It was a piece that nobody could see.

Rail: You didn't use real fireflies?

Parreno: No. Only LEDs.

Rail: Is yeast the only living organism that you've used?

Parreno: Yeah.

Installation shot from *Philippe Parreno, With a Rhythmic Instinction to be Able to Travel Beyond Existing Forces of Life*, 2014.

Rail: I'm thinking about, you know, how in contemporary art there is a history of using animals—using an animal as a medium. For me, this raises very important ethical questions around the notion of consent. I understand that with yeast it's, potentially, a different issue, but when we

get into more complex, multicellular organisms, including fireflies, it becomes problematic. Some artists use dogs, cats, amphibians, and even larger animals like horses, in their works. Do you have thoughts on the ethics of using animals in art?

Parreno: I would not judge, no, because the thing I have in mind would never be—it's not something I would do, you know? But the recent examples that I have in my mind are part of what is now the field of animal studies. More generally, the relation with non-humans. And how to conduct interspecies philosophical examination.

Rail: The firefly piece at the Villa Arson "came alive" at night, when the show was closed. This reminds me of your upcoming exhibition at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, which has a similar ecological operation—

Parreno: With the blinds moving.

Rail: Could you describe the exhibition?

Parreno: It's a commission. There are bay windows that lead to the sculpture park. I installed some blinds—a feature that I have used many times—that move up and down, according to the sun and cloud movements in the sky. It's really discrete because you see the movement, and you can't really link that with the sky movement because you have a big cloud covering the sun. It's alive because of the light that fluctuates in front of you. There's a blind, and there's a marquee as well, so all that sort

of moving. It's again totally an automaton that reacts to light and light changes, and cloud movements.

Rail: Both the lights and blinds are controlled by ecological conditions?

Parreno: Yeah. That's something that I used at Tate as well. Also in the 2017 Venice Biennale, in *Cloud Oktas* (2017), which had a little weather station that sent information on the movement of clouds to a series of fluorescent light bulbs.

Rail: This sort of ecological transposition reminds me of some strategies of sound installation from the 1970s.

Parreno: Yeah, absolutely.

Rail: Liz Phillips; Max Neuhaus. *Cloud Oktas* is similar to David Behrman's *Cloud Music* (1974-79), where he pointed a video camera at the clouds, with various tracking marks, and transposed the visual imagery within an analog audio synthesizer.

Parreno: Absolutely. I worked as an assistant to Max Neuhaus in the 1980s.

Rail: I just finished a dissertation on Neuhaus.

Parreno: Oh, no, wow! It's really sad that his work is not really seen—seen or heard—anymore. There should be a way for the museums to show

it. I told Andrea Lissoni that doing a show in the Tate would be great, in the big—

Rail: The Turbine hall?

Parreno: Fantastic. It's perfect for a sound piece. Neuhaus's river piece *River Grove* (1988) in Aspen, Colorado, was beautiful as well.

Rail: Do you see yourself in this history of sound installation and music?

Parreno: I understand your question, but for me the practice of art is never linked to a medium. Of course people would like to be comfortable and say, "It's sculpture," "Department of Sculpture and Painting," or whatever MoMA does, but for me the production of a form is a negotiation. It's not about the format. I grew up being a conceptual artist, so for me the form doesn't really tell you much about the nature of the art project. So, I will not say that I see myself within the history of sound installation and music, but I will say that the condition of an object—let's put it that way—is still a negotiation. Whether the object becomes stochastic or eternal, you know, it's up for negotiation. So, yes, Neuhaus, but I was also influenced by Robert Rauschenberg and Cage, because Cage is sound-based.

Rail: You use sound quite often. Are you drawn to sound, in particular, because of its imminence? Because sound is always new?

Installation view of Hyundai Commission 2016: Philippe Parreno: *Anywhen*, 2016. Photo by Tate Photography.

Parreno: Yes, absolutely. I am becoming more and more interested in sound. I like the nature of the ritual of sound, what sound produces, because sound gets everywhere. Sound is like the air—it's breathing. There's something there that I find more and more fascinating.

Rail: Sound can be microscopic and macroscopic.

Parreno: Yes.

Rail: I'm thinking of your video work *Marilyn* (2012), which addresses sound and listening. The film theorist Michel Chion has come up with all these terms for cinematic sound—*acousmatic sound, diegetic sound, audio-visual contract*—which seem relevant for understanding your work.

In *Marilyn*, you emphasize the sound of a pen on paper, which is very small, and the tone of the room, which is very large.

Parreno: Yeah, absolutely. There's a newer film that I did, *Anywhen* (2016), where I used a ventriloquist, Nina Conti, as a narrator. The film also has squids—

Rail: Another animal.

Parreno: Yeah, well, I have them in the studio. I live with a cephalopod. I love them.

Rail: Do they love you?

Parreno: I try to take care of them, and, I mean, they don't live long. It's a bit of a problem. It's a funny story. I wanted to make a film and so I went to Marseille in the South of France with a fisherman. The fisherman takes the cephalopod and sells them at the market, and he starts to say, "If you have a nice aquarium, I can stop killing them and sell you some." So, I started to put them in Paris to understand them a bit more. People from the oceanographic center have started to come, and we work together. It's kind of interesting to work with them on this.