Alexander R. Bigman, "Philippe Parreno at Gladstone Gallery," Art in America, June/July 2019

# Art in America

## PHILIPPE PARRENO
### Gladstone

In his classic 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell argued that jargon, hackneyed phrasing, and inflated diction plagued modern language and were favorable to insincerity and thus to political speech. When concealing one's aims, he wrote, one turns to such linguistic vices like "a cuttlefish spurting out ink." Philippe Parreno made this squidlike mollusk—which protects itself not only by emitting ink but also by changing the color and texture of its skin—the star of *Anywhen* (2016), a video he created in collaboration with cinematographer Darius Khondji as the centerpiece of his 2016 installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. The installation was remarkably complex: sounds, images, and three-dimensional components continually reconfigured themselves according to a computer program that incorporated data from a live yeast colony whose movements were influenced by environmental conditions outside. Parreno's recent show at Gladstone featured a newly edited version of the video, *Anywhen in a Time Colored Space* (2019). The exhibition was somewhat simpler than the one at Tate Modern and gave greater emphasis to the video, clarifying the function of Parreno's marine protagonist as both an emblem of environmentally responsive art and an expression of anxieties akin to Orwell's.

In the video, close-up shots of the cuttlefish are interspersed with more abstract images of luminous particles adrift in what reads as a primordial bath. Parreno gives this otherworldly microcosm a soundtrack of dissonant electronic sounds and sotto voce recitations, by the ventriloquist Nina Conti, of a cryptic text combining his own words and fragments of James Joyce's writing. Topics range from the nature of temporal experience to life in a digitally mediated world. "We kind of live in a moment in time where we should be hysterical," the speaker at one point insists. "We're just getting bits, bits, bits of data."

Such "bits of data" animate the mise-en-scènes of which the video has formed an integral part. At Gladstone, as at Tate Modern, an assortment of electronically programmed

effects accompanied the screening. Here, fluorescent lights periodically illuminated phosphorescent floral wallpaper; the gallery's window shades repeatedly rose and fell as if by their own will; and an aleatory iteration of the film—generated by an artificial intelligence program designed to predict the next frame of a video on the basis of its preceding sequence—followed the primary one. When the window shades rose for a conclusive time, a microphone outside the gallery transmitted sounds from the street into the exhibition space. The gesture at first heralded a return to reality following *Anywhen*'s mesmeric grip. However, it quickly transformed the outside world into a disconcerting form of spectacle involving the surveilling of passersby.

Issues relating to mass media, spectacle, and surveillance have long occupied Parreno, who achieved widespread recognition for projects like *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006), a feature-length film for which he and Douglas Gordon trained seventeen cameras on the titular Real Madrid football player for the duration of a match. Even as Parreno's subsequent work has expanded into ever more multifaceted installation formats, it has typically retained some allusion to the world of popular entertainment, whether by way of blinking cinema marquees or ghostly player pianos. The popular persists in the recent *Anywhen* presentations, but less in visual terms than in the artist's use of the kind of data-gathering and predictive algorithms on which Silicon Valley relies. The dangers of such invisible architecture have become all too apparent, pointing to more diffuse and, some would say, insidious forms of social control than the centralized totalitarianism that threatened Orwell's time.

—Alexander R. Bigman