



Special reports

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SPECIAL REPORTS

# Interview: Philippe Parreno goes with the flow

The French artist's ambitious Turbine Hall commission for Tate Modern is a gesamtkunstwerk of sound, bacteria, floating fish and a ventriloquist

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by LOUISA BUCK | 6 October 2016

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Philippe Parreno; Photo: Andrea Rossetti

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Throughout his distinguished 30-year career, the French artist Philippe Parreno has earned a reputation for collaborations with artists as well as practitioners in a wide range of fields, including film, music, animation, sound and science, that explore and shake up how we can, and should, experience art. He sees an exhibition as a work of art and a medium in its own right—an idea he has pursued with a particular vengeance in his Turbine Hall commission at London’s Tate Modern. Entitled *Anywhen*, the unpredictable, event-packed environment takes the form of a multifarious, multilayered *gesamtkunstwerk* of constantly changing sound, light and shadow. It is further animated by floating fish-shaped balloons, a moving, dangling forest of suspended loudspeakers, and a cinema that randomly appears and disappears while showing a specially made film featuring bacteria, cuttlefish and the London-based ventriloquist Nina Conti.

**The Art Newspaper: You’ve described the Turbine Hall as a “public park”. Was this notion of a space that is used by many people at different times of the day an important starting point for the work?**

Philippe Parreno: I wanted to use the fact that it is free and a place where people actually hang out, play, eat and gather, and where things differ from the morning to the night as a journey. I took it as a place where time can float and things can come in and disappear: that’s the structure, it’s a time project. I think of [it] as an automaton that works on a timeline of eight hours: it opens at ten and closes at six. The automaton wakes up and begins its movement when the doors open, and another kind of atmosphere [emerges] as the sun declines and there is less light. It is never the same and would be impossible to repeat anywhere else.

**Where does the title *Anywhen* come from?**

It comes from the concept of “floating attention”, a term used by psychoanalysts in the 1970s [to describe the necessary state of the analyst’s mind when listening to the patient, mirroring the free association required of the patient]. This idea of floating attention, floating time and floating space led me to the notion of *anywhen*, which I believe is an Old English word used by [the novelist James] Joyce. I like that it is not defined time, it is floating.

**There are several layers of sound playing through the space, from ambient noises coming from in and around the building itself to music specially composed in response to your work and the Turbine Hall by the London band Factory Floor, the US musician Robert Lowe a.k.a. Lichens and the French composer-producer DJ Agoria.**

I like to work with people, but I’ve also tried to hear the sounds coming from in and around the building itself, so I’ve placed microphones around to pick up sounds from the street and airplanes passing by. So from time to time the building becomes transparent acoustically, and, like the waves of the city, the soundscape comes in and out.

**Another site-specific element is the inflatable fish that float freely in the hall.**

Yes, they are all [species of] fish that have been in the River Thames. Some have disappeared, some still exist and some have just come back; they are ghosts.

**You’ve used the idea of the gamelan, a traditional Indonesian orchestra, as a metaphor for how you work and make exhibitions. Does this apply here?**

Yes. A gamelan is an ensemble of different percussion instruments that are relevant as individual objects but

become a single instrument when they come together. It requires a lot of musicians, but it is led by a single person—the dalang—who is a kind of spiritual leader conducting and directing the ensemble. For me, it is a good definition of an art object which, on its own can occupy space and is quite decorative, and yet when it comes together with other objects it becomes performative again.

**Is it true that you have appointed a colony of bacteria to be the underpinning dalang that directs all the elements of Anywhen? It's hard to believe that a bioreactor containing micro-organisms is the living command centre for the entire exhibition.**

I first tried this in my show with Barbara Gladstone [in New York in April], which was based on experiments I did with scientists in Paris on bacteria in a bioreactor. It was quite successful, so I thought it could be something to do for the Tate. I liked the idea that this colony of bacteria can actually control your surroundings and affect the huge space of the Turbine Hall. So there are moments that have been composed not by me, but by the bacteria that control your surroundings by responding to information coming from its surroundings. So things happen not because they are controlled or designed by me, but because they happen in the realm of the bacteria. I also like that although you can see bioreactors in a small room at the back of the Turbine Hall, it is also a fiction—you have to believe it is taking place.

**Among the many other unpredictable—and perhaps bacteria-triggered—events is the temporary cinema that randomly descends from the ceiling and shows a film featuring enlarged images of bacteria, as well as footage of cuttlefish and the English ventriloquist Nina Conti, who performs a voiceover written by you.**

Cuttlefish are fantastic creatures that are quite like my idea of an alien. I am fascinated by them: they change colours and evolve according to a situation. I have some living in my studio, and I've been filming them and trying to establish communication. Nina narrates the film using a series of texts I wrote some years ago about our relationship to nature. I found it really interesting to see a human talking about these creatures, but without moving her lips or opening her mouth. It looks really weird and mechanical. It's a way of working with the human and non-human. She is a narrator who questions humanity.

- *The Hyundai Commission: Philippe Parreno, Tate Modern, London, until 2 April 2017*

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