

GLADSTONE GALLERY



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## The uncanny world of Philippe Parreno

The artist's solo show at the Beyeler this month includes new films starring a black garden and a robotic Marilyn Monroe

By Louisa Buck. Features, Issue 236, June 2012

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For Marilyn, 2012, Parreno recreated Monroe's hotel room at the Waldorf Astoria. The film is shot from the movie star's perspective, using algorithms to recreate her handwriting and voice

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Philippe Parreno has been described as "permanently moving", and certainly his work, whether made on his own or in his frequent collaborations with fellow artists, evades easy definition in its constant exploration of how art can and should be experienced. The Algerian-born, Paris-based artist is probably best known for two collaborative works, each of which uses film to examine notions of portraiture and the representation of individuals. *Zidane: a 21st-century Portrait*, made with the British artist Douglas Gordon in 2006, is composed of footage shot from 17 different cameras trained on the French footballer Zinedine Zidane during a match between Real Madrid and Villareal. For *No Ghost Just a Shell*, 1999, Parreno and the French artist Pierre Huyghe bought the copyright for the Japanese Manga character Annlee, and then invited artists to make work in response to this off-the-peg avatar. More recently, Parreno has been working alone, but for his solo show at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel this month, he has enlisted film crews, set builders, landscape architects, digital technicians and even a medium for two new films, which feature an all-black garden and Marilyn Monroe.

## **The Art Newspaper: Why did you choose to make a film about Marilyn?**

Philippe Parreno: It started with a little book that a friend sent me of fragments from her notebooks—and what I liked was her handwriting.

## **So you were attracted by her words and her writing, and not her face or her image.**

The book was published because this year people are celebrating her death, and in my work I am interested in celebration. I was interested in the idea of celebrating a dead person, of trying to portray a ghost. Why are ghosts interesting? Because they are unfinished, heterogenous. Marilyn Monroe represents the first time that the unconscious killed the person—her image killed her. So we had to use an image to bring her back. The film is the portrait of a phantom incarnated in an image. Or, to use a neologism, an attempt to produce a "carnated" image.

**The film is almost the opposite of your Zidane film, in which one person is scrutinised for 90 minutes. Marilyn is shot from her point of view, but you never see her: you see her writing and hear her voice, but these are generated by machines.**

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Yes, there is an uncanniness to the whole mise-en-scène. I am using biometry in the same way that they use biometry to identify a person—by voice, handwriting and eye recognition. The three ways to identify a person are [achieved] by three algorithms: there is one mathematical mechanism for recreating the voice, one for the handwriting, and the third is embodied in a new digital camera that uses the same algorithm I'm using for the handwriting. So the camera becomes her eyes looking around the room. Her prosody [a linguistic term meaning the rhythm, stress and intonation of speech] is played by machines and the voice describes what the picture sees. Then a three-axis delta robot writes what the voice describes. I found it interesting that a little equation could recreate something resembling a human, something quasi-human. We are entering into the uncanny valley [a hypothesis in robotics which suggests that near-lifelike robots provoke revulsion in humans].

**Your fictitious evocation of Marilyn's room at the Waldorf Astoria is also very cinematic.**

The idea of cinema as exhibition is another aspect. The room at the Astoria that I have recreated is basically an exhibition space, so when you enter the room at the Beyeler, you will have the feeling that you are entering two exhibition spaces, one containing the other. So, it's also echoing this early form of cinema, which was basically a circus act or phantasmagoria where there was weird lighting and the projection of smoke. Conjurers would summon some kind of ethereal presence; they would attempt to bring back the dead.

**In Marilyn, the viewer almost inhabits her body—similar to the way in which your film June 8, 1968, 2010, was shot as if from the perspective of the coffin of Bobby Kennedy as it was transported by train from New York to Washington.**

Exactly. It is also the second time that I have taken a dead American hero [as my subject]. I always like to do things that come in pairs. I guess one pair was Annlee and Zidane; another is June 8, 1968 with Marilyn. Another pairing is my film Boy from Mars [2003], where I built the architecture as the set for the film, and Continuously Habitable Zones [2011], the film of a black garden that I have made with the Fondation Daimler and the Fondation Beyeler. Both are science-fiction films that leave their set behind to continue to exist in reality. The landscape is this sort of residue. It survives the making of the work.



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**For *Continuously Habitable Zones*, you have created a garden entirely made of black plants, with the sound coming from microphones buried in the earth and inserted into the plants. Is there also a relationship between this film and *Marilyn*?**

Both are basically portraits of two artificially created creatures. The black garden is a Frankenstein-like creature. I built this garden in Portugal in order to shoot the film, but although the work of art is the film, this weird, mad landscape has survived the shooting and lives on, like its waste or excess. So you have this work, which will enter into collections and will be historicised and archived, but there is something that is left over, that leaks out of the work and has its own life. I am more and more interested by this idea that there is something left unfinished and incomplete—just like a ghost.

**You consider the exhibition to be as much a work of art as the individual pieces within it, so how will you orchestrate the rooms at the Beyeler?**

Until I have finished the films, I am not completely sure; without the performers, you can't do the choreography. But I will explore the idea of making the works leak out beyond their specific time and place. One way I am choreographing and extending the exhibition beyond its three-month run is by giving each visitor who comes to the museum a DVD of both films, so when they leave the museum, they will take the exhibition with them and extend the pictures in space and time. But each DVD will be coded so that at a certain time they will erase themselves and not be playable any more. It's a bit like having two creatures that can come and live in your computer for a while, and then die.

**Whether in your films or in other manifestations, such as the sculptures of Christmas trees that function as works of art during every month except December, you always seem to be concerned with exploring and manipulating notions of the timeframe and presentation of works.**

I believe that this works for all works of art: paintings also come with a timeframe and a time protocol. We believe that a painting is forever but, of course, it is the museography that decides. If you go into the reserves of the Musée d'Orsay, you will see things that people never see, and all these things were supposed to be forever. A work doesn't exist until you rediscover it—and according to which protocol do you discover it? Because it's always through our reading of history that we rediscover and reinvent what we see.