

# Art Review:

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'Mama always told me not to look into the eye of the sun / But mama, that's where the fun is' Bruce Springsteen

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Philippe Parreno

Serpentine Gallery, London  
25 November – 13 February

Art exhibitions don't usually place the viewer as the subject of the show. For his first solo show in a UK public institution, French artist Philippe Parreno compactly summarises 20 years of work committed to denaturalising cinematic, theatrical and visual-art forms of experience, while interrogating the politics of presentation that underpin the art institution and the contemporary culture of the image. That such weighty problems are offered in a staging that has something in common with a funfair ride is part of the charm – and the difficulty – of Parreno's work.

Four short videoworks are shown in a cycle, as a system of automated blinds and lights draw visitors from one video to the next. *No More Reality, la manifestation* (1991) is a low-resolution clip of a group of kids protesting with banners and chanting the slogan "No more reality!" Which reality? Clearly not the one which is supposed to be transparently presented by orthodox, mass-media forms of film and video. Is "No more reality!" a demand on the part of the kids, a refusal to be representable – or a statement of fact, made by the video itself?

This tautological loop, between reality, fiction, staging, visual image and the physically present viewer winds through the other works as well. *The Boy from Mars* (2003) is a sumptuous

film sequence of a lightweight, polythene-clad barn structure in a semitropical environs, lights glowing within, a pulley counterweight mechanism and an ox engaged in hauling what might be a connected cable. We're told that the film was made using electricity generated by the ox's work, which also lights the building. Not a film about *something*, then, as much as about the conditions of its own making, about an idea of real work harnessed to the making of cinema work; the awkward and counterintuitive statement that the one condition for filmmaking is that your batteries not run out.

So the gallery-goer is drawn into a self-conscious relationship with his own spectatorship. *June 8, 1968* (2009) ostensibly restages the passage of the assassinated Robert Kennedy's corpse on a funeral train from New York to Washington, DC. Except that none of the impeccably 1960s-styled actors lining the train's route make the kinds of mourning gestures we would expect. We are left with the uneasy sense that these dramatised stand-ins for a 'real' event are in fact real actors simply staring back – at us. Historical time and documentary time no longer function synchronously, while reality and cinematic distance collapse.

The cycle concludes with *Invisibleboy* (2010), a short, darkly brooding sequence centred on a little Chinese boy, his cluttered urban environs and scenes of rag-trade workshops. Animated cartoon creatures appear at various moments, using the old technique of scratching into the film emulsion itself, frame by frame. *Invisibleboy* again disrupts the distance between fiction, social realism and the production apparatus of the medium. As the blinds go up, we notice that it's snowing outside the gallery windows. Or is this a bit of staging too?

If Parreno elegantly succeeds in making every step into the gallery a precariously self-aware one, where reality and theatre are indistinct, his technique quickly becomes didactic, pedagogical – we are being *taught* something about our implication in the hidden ideology of the gallery. This overarching, post-Godardian reflexivity yields only a rather etiolated pleasure – tracing the mechanics of failing, fading cultural forms within their own precinct neither abolishes them nor supersedes them. And as the little *AC/DC Snakes* (1995–2010) dotted around the Serpentine's electrical outlets – each one a concatenation of different international adapters plugged together and terminating in a nightlight – keep telling us, everything is only an expression of the system that permits it to exist. But then what, if anything, can we do about it? *J.J. Charlesworth*

*Invisibleboy*, 2010, film still.  
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