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Philippe Parreno's video art: a moving spectacle full of snowdrifts and tears

The French video artist has taken over the vast Palais de Tokyo in Paris with a heart-stopping immersive show that includes manga characters, Marilyn Monroe and Zinedine Zidane



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Watching you baby ... Philippe Parreno's *Anywhere, Anywhere Out of the World*.
Photograph: Aurelien Mole

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What should I tell you about first? Marilyn Monroe's suite at the Waldorf Astoria? The giant cephalopod? The secret gallery behind the bookcase? The snowdrift? Footballer Zidane seen from 17 angles at once? Should I mention the sound of rain on the stairs, and the telephone whose urgent bell interrupts us as we make our way through the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, where [Philippe Parreno's Anywhere, Anywhere Out of the World](#) is now open.

Parreno is the first artist ever to fill the whole building, from the steps outside where one of his marquees hangs over the entrance, through the large open spaces beyond the ticketing desk, down stairwells and into the concrete under-crofts, the multi-level lower floors and basement auditoriums of this enormous place. This is an exhibition of sounds as much as sights, darkness as well as light.

Often, big surveys of an artist's work can become one damn thing after another, and they exhaust you. Parreno, who earlier this year created the mise en scène for the Barbican's exhibition [The Bride and the Bachelors: Duchamp with Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns](#), never differentiates between his works and their setting. He never forgets his audience, and how his spectators move from work to work. He knows we bring his works to life, asking in return to be surprised, enchanted and taken on a journey. All his works are a collaboration: with the setting, with us, and with the many other artists he has worked with, both living and dead.



'He never forgets his audience.' Photograph: Aurelien Mole

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Early on in his planning for this show, Parreno thought of engaging the services of a clairvoyant to help him organise his works, but dropped the idea, and has used instead Igor Stravinsky's *Petroushka*, performed by the virtuoso pianist Mikhail Rudy and replayed on four Disklavier pianos dotted through the exhibition, to orchestrate the show. Rudy is an apparition, the keys of the pianos moving to his invisible hands. The exhibition unfolds to Stravinsky's rhythms. Lights throughout the building flicker to the music. Films start up and stop again. There are entr'actes. Spaces and musical intervals, pauses and action follow the music as we go from work to work, space to space.

Petroushka was a doll that came to life, and is but one more ghost in Parreno's machine. Even the building itself becomes a gigantic automaton. Everything becomes part of a vast mechanical apparatus, churning through Parreno's preoccupations, the past and the future. We go from spectacle to bafflement, moments of melancholy to visceral excitement.

Down in the basement I find myself in a black space flaring and chattering with sizzling neons and light bulbs that pop like champagne corks. The space seems to have no end. Parreno's 16 theatrical marquees, like the ones you find above cinema entrances, hang from the ceilings and jut from the walls. Each one is different. The bulbs and neons dance on and off, play out visual melodies, hum, drone and chatter. It is like being in a room filled with spaceships. People stand mesmerised. Kids run under the lights, trying to play catch-up, as first one bank of lights then another charges up then dies, leaving us in the dark. Intermittently, the lights follow the surges of *Petroushka*. I faze in and out of the rhythm, following and forgetting, running ahead and falling behind. People stay here a long time.

Parreno has used the exhibition as a way of seeing his own work, and himself, differently. He uses his art as elements in a narrative that dwells on presence and absence. Our own entrances and exits become part of this.

Maybe that is why this disjunctive ensemble of video, objects, spaces, ghosts and apparitions, old works and new, is so moving, and why it is not so much an immersive exhibition as one that engulfs you. It is a heart-stopping and difficult experience and it is overwhelming. More than once I saw people cry, and turn away to be with their own thoughts.

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Parreno's version of Marilyn Monroe's suite at the Waldorf Astoria. Photograph: Aurelien Mole

Why the tears? My own moment came when watching [Parreno's 2012 film Marilyn](#). Monroe's voice, recreated by computer, takes us on a tour of the hotel suite where she lived in the late 1950s. What Marilyn sees, the camera sees. We watch through her eyes. Sunlight falls into the room. Rain beats at the window. Sometimes the camera swerves along with Marilyn's frantic glances, her growing sense of hysteria and entrapment. Her eyes snag on the corners of things, the light glancing cruelly on polished surfaces. The studied normality of the room becomes a prison. The cushions, too perfectly arranged at either end of a sofa, look like a dumb rebuke. Her solitude seems terrible. The telephone rings but goes unanswered.

Towards the end, the camera retreats from the window, gliding between the occasional tables, the slipper chairs, the lilies in the vase. The camera's tracks appear, then some bulky electronic equipment, as we back off, revealing the room as a movie set with no one in it. As the film ends, lights go up on the other side of the screen where the film has been projected, to reveal a huge snowdrift beyond. The temperature plummets. The sound of the rain we heard in the film is unabated.

This moment is somehow intensely moving. We are in a set too, just as Marilyn was. What is this subterranean drift of real snow in the Palais de Tokyo's basement? Ice in the soul? Death? Are we in Marilyn's mind or is she in ours? I begin to notice other piles of snow around the auditorium, like the shovelled-up slush you see on winter New York sidewalks.

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When you buy a ticket for the show you get given a DVD of Marilyn. It can only be played once, because the dvd erases itself as you watch it, leaving you with a memory of something seen that can't be recaptured. The DVD is called Precognition.

Back upstairs, on a huge screen near the show's entrance area, early films by Parreno play. From 30 yards away, they seem projected in thin air. A cuttlefish writhes, giving off a strange fluorescence. Then a baby's pink face fills the screen, then some flowers. These early films by Parreno dwarf us as we approach, and as we get close they disintegrate into a grille of little bulbs hanging in space, rows of winking LED lights.

There are so many details to catch on. Even the end wall of one space, covered in black material, vibrates with a sonorous hum. And what of the bookcase, for which [Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster](#) acted as librarian, that pivots to allow access to a secret room containing a recreation of a John Cage and Merce Cunningham show, in which the pair substitute one another's work over the show's duration, swapping Cage's spidery, trembling drawings with Cunningham's lovely drawings of owls, cormorants and herons. This inclusion is like a love story.



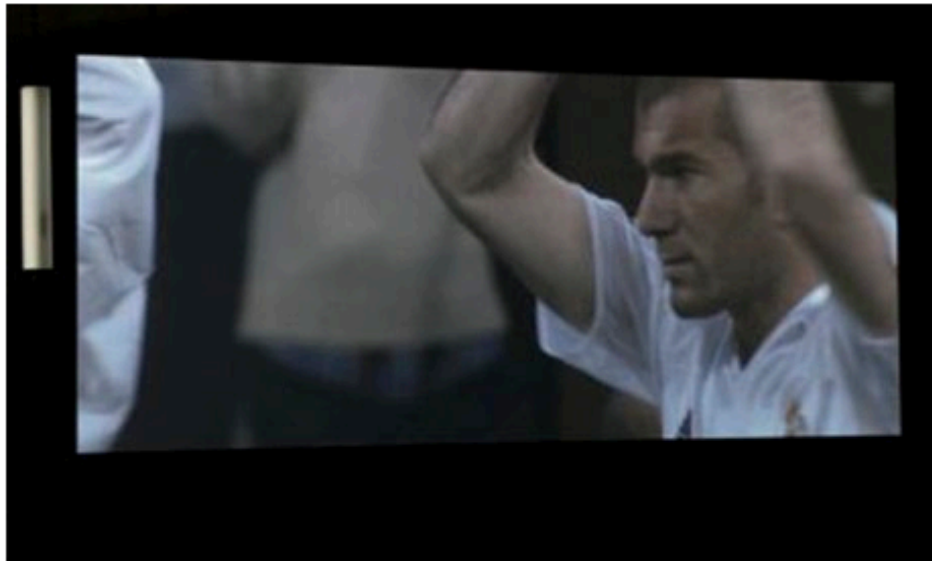
Annlee, created by Parreno and Pierre Huyghe. Photograph: Aurelien Mole

Much later, in another room, the Japanese Manga character [Annlee](#), who Parreno and fellow French artist [Pierre Huyghe](#) bought the rights to in 1999, tells her story. A decommissioned virtual being, she became a kind of common property shared between Parreno, Huyghe and a number of other artists.

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When the short CGI film ends, a young girl walks into the auditorium. A real-life Annlee. Her choreographed movements and voice have the strange, limpid grace of a computer-generated doll. This live element is a work by [Tino Sehgal](#). The girl pauses and asks "What is the difference between a sign and melancholia?"

Annlee is a sign, a trace. Her melancholy is the result of an inability to either fully enter the world or leave it. This is our fate too in Parreno's netherworld. Does real life end in the gallery, the cinema or the theatre? How much are we in the world when we lose ourselves to our thoughts in music, a movie or a book?



Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait. Photograph: Aurelien Mole

Late on a Friday night I go back. This is my third visit to Parreno's show in two days. I want to know what the vibe is like close to midnight (the show is open till midnight six days a week). People drift around. I meet a couple cuddling among the Marquees, a man alone watching Marilyn. I make my way to Parreno and [Douglas Gordon's](#) film [Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait](#), probably the work Parreno is best known for. Unlike the single-channel commercial movie, here it is projected, for the first time, on a floating maze of 17 screens. Each screen shows the projected footage from one of the 17 cameras that followed French footballer Zinedine Zidane through a Real Madrid-Villareal game in 2005. As he chases the ball, so we must follow him through the labyrinth of screens, seeing him from this angle and that, losing ourselves in his multiple presences. As we move about, we are being choreographed too, just as we have been throughout the Palais de Tokyo. The only thing to do is retrace our steps and find ourselves again.