

Art Review:

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It's like being on a plane crossing the ocean in 1978: you have one movie seen by all the passengers' - Parreno on Il Tempo del Postino

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IL TEMPO DEL POSTINO

Playing

Philippe Parreno and Hans Ulrich Obrist exchange space for time in their new exhibition, but is it an enduring concept or simply an endurance test?

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For Time

from left: Philippe Parreno with Hans Ulrich Obrist

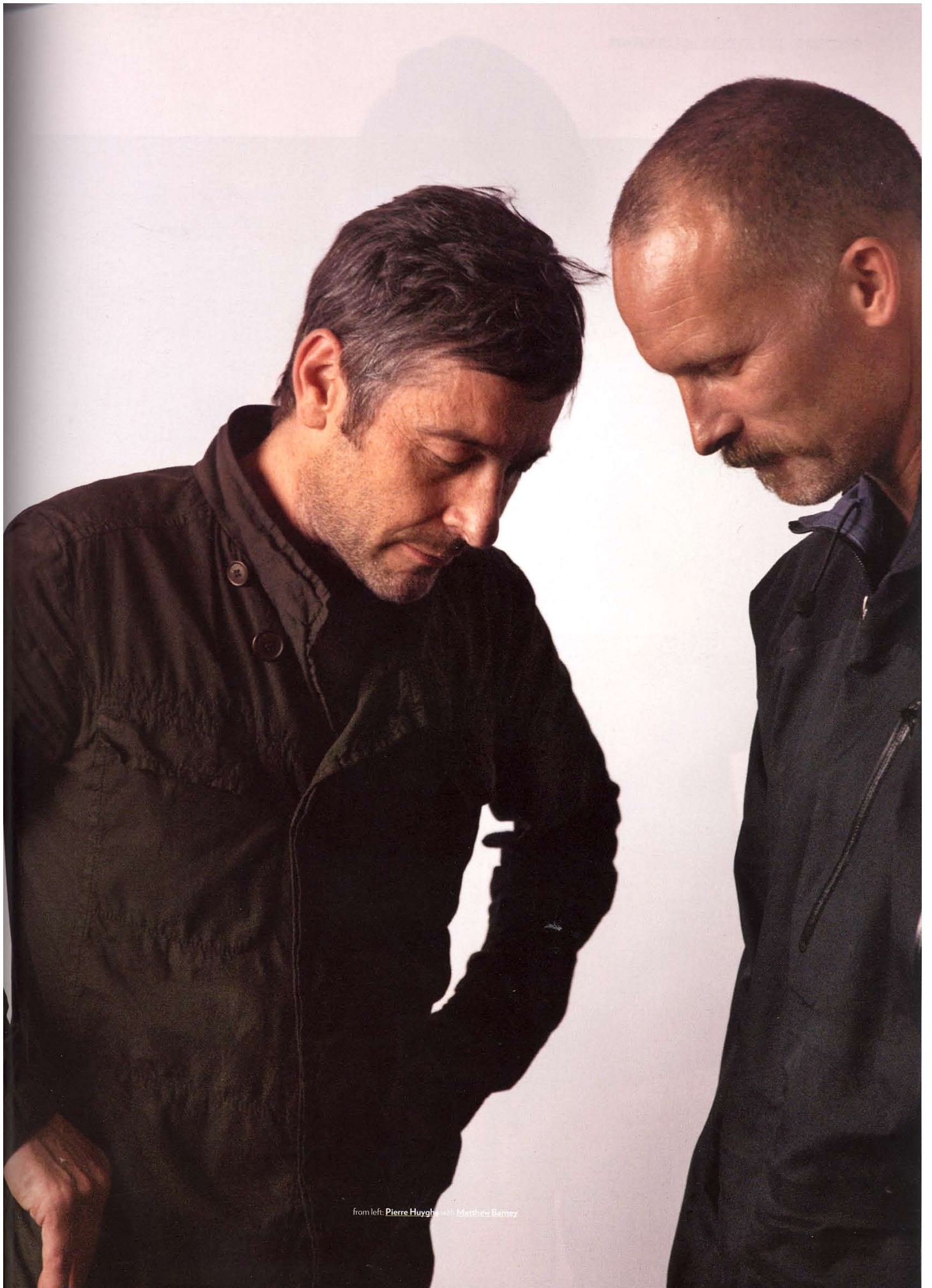


from left: **Matthew Barney, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Tino Sehgal, Pierre Huyghe, Koo Jeong-A, Philippe Parreno, Liam Gillick, Ramdane Touhami, Rirkrit Tiravanija**

"IT'S LIKE BEING ON A PLANE IN 1978: you have one movie seen by all the passengers." That's artist-curator Philippe Parreno describing what it's like to experience *Il Tempo del Postino*, a group show featuring a series of time-based artworks, co-curated with Hans Ulrich Obrist. And although it premiered in an ornate 2,000-seat opera house (as part of this summer's Manchester International Festival) rather than in the claustrophobic environment of a sealed jet plane, there's no disguising the fact that it doesn't sound like a particularly attractive proposition. Not just because there's something more than a little grim about the thought of an exhibition inspired by the dark ages of inflight entertainment; but also because Parreno appears to be invoking the kind of setup – a group of people imprisoned on a plane with no way out – that forms the basis of so many disaster movies. And once that plane motif has popped out of his mouth, it's hard not to be looking for Bruce Willis bumbling around a fuselage in a sweaty white vest or Samuel L. Jackson strutting and swearing his way through a snake-filled cabin ("Enough is enough!" you imagine him saying, "I have *had* it with these *motherfucking* artists on this *motherfucking* plane!"). But while their similes may appear to be at best anachronistic and at worst unappetising, Parreno and his co-conspirator are convinced that their production could radically alter the way we think about and define the term 'exhibition'.

Indeed, the duo were so convinced of the genius of their trapped-on-a-plane motif that the seats in their Manchester auditorium were decorated with aircraft-style headrest protectors, complete with an *Il Tempo del Postino* logo (a black cross that looks like a stylised version of something Kazimir Malevich would have had hanging round his studio in the early days of Modernism) commissioned from Manchester's most famous design guru, Peter Saville. While the actual effect of this may have done more to give the impression that the auditorium had been prepped by someone with a compulsive, if rather senseless, hygiene fetish, there was definitely a sense, as the show began, that you wouldn't be able to escape before the end of this journey without first taking off your shoes and collecting a parachute.

Aeroplanes aside, the central conceit of *Il Tempo del Postino* is this: 'What if an exhibition was not about occupying space but occupying time?' And the show features a lineup of artists that would cause most of the world's curators to shudder with excitement and reach for a change of underwear (indeed, a glamorous gaggle of curators and dealers from around the world graced the premiere, creating an atmosphere of suitably moist anticipation). On the bill were Doug Aitken, Matthew Barney with Jonathan Bepler, Tacita Dean, Trisha Donnelly, Olafur Eliasson, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Douglas Gordon, Carsten Höller, Pierre Huyghe, Koo Jeong-A, Anri



from left: Pierre Huyghe with Matthias Barney





above: Rirkrit Tiravanija in rehearsals
facing page: Rirkrit Tiravanija with costume designer Ramdane Touhami

Sala, Tino Sehgal and Rirkrit Tiravanija. During the course of the three-hour event, each artist occupied a roughly fifteen-minute slot of 'stage time', with the exception of Barney, whose work constituted the entire forty-five-minute second act.

Sehgal opened with a dance performed by the stage curtains; Aitken had a group of American cattle auctioneers positioned around the auditorium, tossing their supercharged, rhythmic bid-babble from one to the next until it became like some strange Buddhist chant; Sala did something similar with an aria from *Madama Butterfly*; Gordon had a torch singer performing Joy Division's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart'; Donnelly had some tumbling monoliths and a good deal of chain-shaking; Gonzalez-Foerster deconstructed an orchestra during a performance of a Beethoven symphony; Dean showed a film of choreographer Merce Cunningham moving three times to the sound of John Cage's famously silent '433'.

Although Liam Gillick's lonely pianola under an artificial snowstorm, which returned again and again to cover the numerous set changes, and a series of comic sketches featuring a pair of *Sesame Street*-type characters (a giant mop-like creature and a cutesy midget devil) by Pierre Huyghe gave the production some sense of cohesion, the overall effect was as disparate and confusing as Parreno and Obrist's selections of similes, metaphors and associations (of which more in a bit).

In a museum it's the visitors' right to skip by works they're not interested in and dally around those they are. Here that was not the case

That said, with performances that spilled out into the auditorium, many of the works appeared to take Parreno's aviation vision to heart and address their captive audience directly. This reached something of an apotheosis with Eliasson, who brought down a mirrored curtain over the stage, turned up the lights and instructed the orchestra to mirror the coughs and splutters of the audience. Unfortunately, at the premiere, the audience wasn't really playing along. And perhaps that reflected the fact that Eliasson's work was an uncomfortable reminder that the audience were a part of this experiment. The most radical element of the exhibition had not so much to do with the artworks (or as Parreno might put it, with what film the passengers were watching) as it had to do with the audience, and the circumstances under which they experienced the show. In the context of a museum or gallery, it's the inalienable right of exhibition visitors to skip quickly by the works they're not so interested in and dilly-dally around those they are. Here that was not the case, and the viewers' endurance is regulated, and at times tested, by the endurance of the work. Or as Parreno hints, *Il Tempo del Postino* provides an opportunity for the artist's revenge.

While aeroplane entertainments form part of the show's conceit, the phrase *Il Tempo del Postino* originally surfaced in a text by Parreno titled 'Temps Facteur' (which allows for a play on words to give 'time factor' and 'postman time') that investigated the relationships between artists, the institutions that show their works (and define how long they are on view for) and the audience that views them. Somewhat facetiously, Obrist, who cites not an aeroplane but an unrealised building – Cedric Price's Fun Palace – and composer Pierre Boulez's notion of the unfinished or open-ended score as the primary sources of inspiration for the project, adds that the title ended up in Italian so that it would invoke more of an operatic feeling.

American cattle auctioneers tossed their supercharged bid-babble from one to the next until it became like some strange Buddhist chant

below: **Anri Sala** in rehearsals
facing page: **Liam Gillick** with **Anri Sala**







The feeling that Parreno and Obrist give is that 'Il Tempo del Postino' aims to challenge commonsensical ideas of art – the common sense of the words 'exhibition', 'curator' and 'spectator', for example

facing page: Koo Jeong-A with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster

Price's Fun Palace, a performing-arts centre designed in the early 1960s, was invoked in the introduction to *Il Tempo del Postino*, by compère-ventriloquist Jack Johnson. In architectural terms the Fun Palace would have been both everything and nothing. Everything because it was to be the nearest thing to a living, breathing building that could flex and grow to fit the ever-changing needs of its users. And nothing because it would never settle into the kind of definable, graspable, mappable form – which is what architecture is supposed to be all about.

If Price was trying to alter the commonsensical notion of a building, then the feeling that Parreno and Obrist give is that *Il Tempo del Postino* aims to challenge commonsensical ideas of art – the common sense of the words 'exhibition', 'curator' and 'spectator', for example.

And as if to demonstrate that point, any sense of common sense had clearly flown out the window by the end of Barney's performance. Featuring Barney himself dressed as Anubis, with a live dog on his head, a series of fisting, pissing and shitting women, a group of paramilitary banjo players, the ritual embalming of the various organs of an automobile engine and a bull being encouraged (unsuccessfully) to copulate with the back end of a car, the effect really was everything and nothing. For the spectator it was rather like flicking through the pages of an encyclopedia and trying to come up with anything other than a succession of more-or-less random words and images or a cacophony of symbols. You felt that it all meant something very clever and precise, but had little way of comprehending what that precise thing might be.

Now that *Il Tempo del Postino* has flown Manchester (it will be restaged early next year at Châtelet, in Paris, and then a number of other venues), the city's Opera House is pleased to offer the following attractions: *Never Forget* ('This fantastic, wildly funny show is packed with all your favourite TAKE THAT hits, including the Number One smashes Relight My Fire, Pray, Back For Good, Babe and, of course, Never Forget'); *The Puppetry of the Penis* ('a mind-blowing show featuring two strapping Australian men who manipulate their genitalia into various shapes, objects and landmarks'); and comedian Jim Davidson ('X-rated and as controversial as ever, Jim Davidson's new stand-up tour is certain to inflame the PC brigade as he tackles all manner of Forbidden subjects'). And perhaps the real question posed by Parreno and Obrist's production is this: what makes *Il Tempo del Postino* any different from the above-mentioned entertainments? Given that they collectively contain much the same things as Parreno and Obrist's exhibition – singing, dancing, X-rated material, etc. – the answer might be: not a lot. But the fact that this question is being posed – and by Barney's performance more than any other – at a time when art is increasingly defined by institutions (good artists are the ones who bring in the crowds) and market forces (good artists are the ones who sell for loads of money) is a valuable exercise. •

Il Tempo del Postino/Le Facteur Temps will be at the Théâtre Musical de Paris, Châtelet, from 14 to 16 February 2008. Work by Matthew Barney is on show at the Serpentine Gallery, London, from 20 September to 11 November 2007