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Philippe Parreno: timing is everything

From a part-time Christmas tree to the 90-minute portrait of Zinedine Zidane, artist Philippe Parreno tells Stuart Jeffries why he has always got one eye on the clock

Stuart Jeffries
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Part-time artwork ... Philippe Parreno with For Eleven Months of the Year it's An Artwork and in December it's Christmas (2009). Photograph: Magali Delporte for the Guardian

'Do you know the average time a visitor spends in front of a work of art in the Louvre?" asks Philippe Parreno over coffee in his Paris studio. "Only three seconds! Crazy when you think about it." Absolutely – that's no way to treat the Mona Lisa or any of the Louvre's 35,000 artworks.

Philippe Parreno
Serpentine,
London
Starts 25 November
Until 13 February
Details:

020-7402 6075

"At the Met in New York it's 10 seconds. I don't know why there's that difference." Maybe it's because the cakes are better in the Louvre cafe. Or perhaps it's because of Jean-Luc Godard's 1964 film Bande à Part, in which three characters try to break the world record for running through the Louvre. It takes them nine minutes 43 seconds, which probably drags down average artwork viewing times.

These are not small matters. Parreno is an artist long preoccupied with manipulating the intensity of the gallery visitor's experience and, more importantly, its duration. While he is best known for the 2006 film Zidane: a 21st Century Portrait, his work often involves using the gallery as the medium for his art.

"I devise my exhibitions like a film," he says. "I think about sequences, about the rhythm of the experience for the visitor. Or like music: my exhibitions often unfold like a musical score. They unfold in time."

Visitors to Parreno's first British solo show, at London's Serpentine gallery later this month, will be subjected to a battery of devices – including remote-controlled blinds and 160 loudspeakers secreted around the museum – designed to seduce, delay, speed up and then expel visitors into Kensington Gardens.

His show will juxtapose intriguingly with two shows across London. At the White Cube, Mason's Yard, is Christian Marclay's 24-hour long video work stitching together snippets from 3,000 films, in which clocks appear or characters refer to time. The artworks in Move: Choreographing You at the Hayward are configured to manipulate visitors' movements around the gallery. Parreno's art has some similar moves, but he isn't just about spatial manipulation. Instead, he tries to temporalise space, while other artists merely occupy it until it's time for their paintings, sculptures or screens to return to storage.

Consider his 2002 Paris exhibition Alien Seasons. This included a film about the giant Pacific cuttlefish that changes its skin colour to hypnotise prey and hide from predators. The fish's changing colours triggered a programmed loop in the exhibition that sequenced music and lighting. In one room, a copy of Robert Rauschenberg's 1951 White Painting was displayed, but after a few minutes, blinds across the windows darkened the space and the painting became the surface for a screening of Parreno's one-minute film The Dream of a Thing, shot near the Arctic Circle. Then the blinds went up and the space was lit for precisely four minutes 33 seconds – alluding to John Cage's silent piece of music 4'33" (itself inspired by Rauschenberg's painting) – before the film started again.

That wasn't all. Then visitors walked through a corridor, passing a cupboard containing the show's technical equipment. Finally, drawn by constantly changing shades of colour, produced by blinds and coloured foil covering the windows, they reached the last space, where Parreno's film Credit was shown.

What was all that about? "I was engaging with Rauschenberg and Cage: how they thought about time. And I was putting a work of art in real time, too. Depending on the light, the viewer's shadow might or might not fall on the Rauschenberg painting, marking the eternal artwork with something temporary.

"But the big thing was to aesthetically shape the experience in time – to draw people through the gallery with effects. It wasn't as complex as what I hope to achieve at the Serpentine, but it gives you an idea."

Parreno, then, isn't so much a creator of art objects as of situations. The artwork, for him, is defined by its context. In this is the ghostly echo of what Marcel Duchamp did in 1917 when he put a urinal in a gallery and thereby made it art. "Art is filled with things that aren't so much objects but quasi-objects," says Parreno. What are they then? "Objects whose existence is dependent on their context."

In Parreno's studio is one of those quasi-objects. It is an aluminium Christmas tree, complete with baubles and fake snow, called For Eleven Months of the Year it's An Artwork and in December it's Christmas (2009). Does this signify, given that it's decorating his studio in late October, that Parreno is living out the dismal dream of Wizzard's song I Wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day?

"It's an off-duty artwork," says Parreno. "When it goes back into service it'll be what it was before – an artwork that looks like a fetishistic object."

Hopefully, that Christmas tree will make an appearance at his Serpentine show, which runs through the festive season. "I'm not sure I'm bringing it," he says. "But I will have some snow effects. I want to animate the space, fill it with ghosts. I'll have automatic blinds that will rise up as you're walking round and you will say, 'Shit! It's snowing!' but it will only be me releasing some fake snow."

No more reality

What else is he planning? Parreno produces a model of the Serpentine and gives me a walk-through using his pen. In the entrance hall there will be a film called No More Reality!, part of which involves schoolchildren marching and shouting the film's title. Then visitors will be lured around the gallery by those 160 loudspeakers. "I will mix the voices so that they get louder as you get nearer the three films I'll be showing." There will also be speakers dotted around Kensington Gardens that will be broadcast in the

gallery. "I'm interested in how sound can drive things. The master will be the sound and the slave will be the image." How long do you expect visitors to stay, given the Louvre's disappointing stats? "I'm aiming at an average of 20 seconds," says Parreno. He is, I suspect, joking.

Among the three films Parreno will show will be one called June 8 1968. This is his seven-minute reimagining of the journey that Bobby Kennedy's coffin took on a train from New York to Washington. That journey was recorded in a picture essay by Paul Fusco, who photographed mourners as the train passed. What inspired you to make it? "Fusco's photos really unsettled me." Why? "It was the point of view of the dead. People are looking at you. And you are dead and invisible to their gaze."

Parreno recreated this film, deliberately shooting in LA and San Francisco, in landscapes that were nothing like those in Fusco's photos, and using actors to play the mourners on the route. "I wanted to recreate not the historical event but that *mal etre*, the unease you feel on being stared at, the unease one feels in another's naked presence." This film juxtaposes with another in the show called Invisible Boy, about a five-year-old Chinese illegal immigrant who he found in New York living with his grandparents. "I'm best known for my film about Zidane, which showed a super-visible body. After making that it seemed a good idea to make films about someone who doesn't exist, at least not on paper."

Zidane: a 21st Century Portrait remains Parreno's most famous work. In it, he and fellow artist Douglas Gordon trained 17 cameras on the footballer and miked him up for the 90 minutes of a Spanish league match. The results were very different from a post-match analysis on Match of the Day or a Sky Sports' player-cam. Viewers never left Zidane to follow the ball, nor were there wide shots to give his performance context. The crowd's roar was replaced by Zidane's breathing and shouting to his teammates – making the resulting film intimate and likably perverse: it amounted, as one critic put it, to "a concentrated study of real-life absorption under conditions of maximum publicity".

It wasn't a film about a footballer, but the continuation of a historical debate. The 18th-century French philosopher Denis Diderot distinguished between the posed portrait and one in which the subject appeared truly absorbed in what they were doing and oblivious to being beheld. Only the latter, Diderot argued, was truthful.

Parreno and Gordon took the idea of a portrait of someone absorbed in a task to see what it looked like unfolded in time. Diderot, quite possibly, would have admired this feat. How amazing that Zidane, shot from all sides and screamed at by 80,000 fans, demonstrably remained absorbed in his work. How incredible that the artists could, in this 21st-century world of media saturation, depict him, seemingly unposed, calmly

going about his business.

Are you mostly a film-maker? "Not really, though I am planning an adaptation of Joris-Karl Huysmans's decadent novel À Rebours. Increasingly, it is sound that interests me." He's currently working with musicians at Paris's Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique, in a project he hopes to exhibit in Dublin next year. It involves using a symphony orchestra to create the sound of a human voice. Why? "I like the idea of a ghost speaking, something human coming out of something non-human."

First, Parreno has to inflate some balloons. He has an exhibition looming at Turin's Castello di Rivoli and wants to cover the ceiling with balloons. "The piece will be called From November 5 Until They Fall. The gallery has agreed that they will leave the exhibition open until that happens." But what if they never fall? "Then," says Parreno, the time and motion artist, "the exhibition will never end."