

Philippe Parreno, Serpentine Gallery, London

Film, installations and surprises blend in Parreno's typically off-beat show

Reviewed by Ossian Ward

Sunday, 28 November 2010

How long should you spend in an exhibition of contemporary art?

Exactly half an hour, naturellement, according to Philippe Parreno's latest show. From the moment you enter this cycle of films and installations, the artist is in control of your movements – as well as your time – pulling you one way with voices and another way with the opening of automatic window blinds or the rude awakening of bright lights flicking on abruptly. You are choreographed, or rather corralled, through the gallery's four spaces, in pursuit of a succession of ever more baffling vignettes and subversive interventions, until your 30 minutes are up and it all starts over again.

As this interactive playlet is computer-programmed and mechanically looped, Parreno himself has no need to be hidden backstage, Oz-like behind a curtain, to push viewers' buttons. Take the sudden appearance of snow outside (artificial, of course), which drifts theatrically across Kensington Gardens as the shutters whirl open after a screening of his latest short, *Invisibleboy*. In this mini-fantasy, set to a driving instrumental soundtrack, a Chinese kid's imaginary cartoon buddies pop up all over New York's Chinatown, etched into the film stock like electrically charged bunnies. It's a magical, twilight world, befitting the subject and its snowy epilogue.

The last time Parreno showed in London, at the Pilar Corrias Gallery, he put a sorry-looking Christmas tree (again, purposely artificial) in the gallery's shop window, but this was not just a seasonal gesture. The Algerian-born, Paris-based artist has spent the past 20 years making flighty, protean works that fluctuate between sculpture, music, film and experience, but always with an underlying spirit of fantasy or audience participation, hence the unexpected winter wonderland at the Serpentine. This wilful mischief in exhibition-making has earned Parreno the tag "relational" artist, and "post-medium" practitioner, one who blurs and hybridises traditional categories and genres.

Such buzz words hardly help to see the wizard more clearly, though, and neither does this slimmed-down survey of Parreno's films, spanning 1991 to the present day. The earliest of them hints at an overriding theme, as a faked protest-mob of school children shout and wave banners in support of "No More Reality". Next door, *The Boy From Mars* (2003) is a slow-burner, and the longest film here at just over 10 minutes,



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*A scene from the short film *Invisibleboy*, in which a boy's imaginary friends are etched into the film stock*

ostensibly showing close-ups of a water buffalo and a flurry of those candle-powered floating lanterns beloved of New Year parties. Actually, it documents a functional greenhouse structure built by Parreno for an eco-art project in Thailand called The Land, powered by the buffalo. Without any contextual explanation of this living art commune (started by a Thai friend of Parreno's) the film might as well have been set on Mars, for all it tells us about the man pointing the lens.

When the rumbling loudspeakers beckon you to the central space, the main event begins. For June 8, 1968 Parreno has distilled the arduous eight-hour train journey taken on that date by the body of Robert F Kennedy after he was shot (five years after his brother, JFK, and only months after Martin Luther King) to just seven minutes of gorgeous, high-definition, and strangely uplifting funeral cortège. Parreno's mourners – or performers – line the tracksides in immaculate 1960s garb, but aren't as numerous or as sorrowful as the news feeds of the day suggest. Rather, they seem glamorously preserved, as if part of a Ralph Lauren commercial, or a Parreno dreamscape, where the beholder slowly becomes subject matter and vice versa. This was the point of Parreno's most famous film to date, his 2006 feature-length portrayal of a footballer, Zinedine Zidane: A 21st-Century Portrait, made with an artist friend, Douglas Gordon.

Time waits for no man, so as soon as this slice of faux nostalgia is over, it's back to the snow, or the buffalo, or the little boy's banshees. Any linking threads – invisibility, castles in the air, protest, 1968 – are as unstable and shifting as Parreno himself. As there's no big reveal, it's likely you'll leave with your traditional view of gallery-going challenged, if not severely threatened.

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Ossian Ward is Visual Art Editor at 'Time Out'

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