

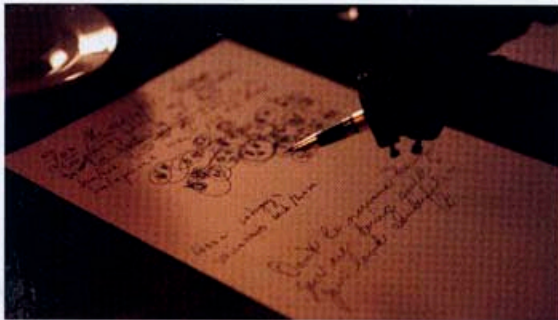


Philippe Parreno, *Speaking to the Penguins*, 2007, color silver print, 59 1/2 x 89 1/4".

CLOSE-UP

Northern Light

MOLLY NESBIT ON PHILIPPE PARRENO'S *SPEAKING TO THE PENGUINS*, 2007



Philippe Parreno, *Marilyn*, 2012.
digital video, color, 19 minutes
49 seconds.

The words that accompany works of art are based first and last in an oral culture not susceptible to total capture.

WHEN *ARTFORUM* WAS BEING BORN some fifty years ago, it was not uncommon for artists themselves to write. “Before he became a painter,” Lucy Lippard explained in 1970, “[Lawrence] Weiner was a poet. He no longer writes, but his book, *Statements*, published by Seth Siegelaub in 1968, presents his work in a form generally associated with poetry—a single phrase per page, with blank facing page, no punctuation, and such eccentric, nonhyphenated word breaks as *f/rom, st/andard, pressur/e*.” These lines anchored an essay titled “Art Within the Arctic Circle,” which she included in her book *Changing the next year*.*

Writing includes all the changing ideas, media, directions, hotels, sheets of paper, tracks. Poetry gave way to statements; some artists developed rhetorics that would let them joust with the art critics and win. Then came the *October* years, when critics went into battle as philosophical theorists. Eventually philosophers themselves steered their writing into the art press and now occupy pride of place. Yet for all this, fifty years later, writing about art is still not the province of any one discipline or practice: Amateurs cohabit with professionals; texts multiply and spawn. Writers continually ask themselves the author question: What is an author now, or, better, what does writing do? The matter of writing goes beyond art criticism per se. Call it a reprise of *f/rom, st/andard, pressur/e*. We writers invent nothing. We continue.

More than anything, we speak, we break, and we keep speaking. The words that accompany works of art are based first and last in an oral culture not susceptible to total capture. Traces of this culture can be netted in interviews, but more often than not speech escapes the page and time.

The artist Philippe Parreno has been looking for the right words since 1997, when he made helium balloons literally embody comic books’ speech bubbles. Those first *Speech Bubbles* were held by other people marching in a labor demonstration; Parreno hoped that everyone would write his or her own personal

speeches on them. Subsequently, for a variety of occasions, he remade the balloons in different colors—silver, white, black—and set them free. These balloons stayed blank. They moved like schools of fish or bat colonies; they have bounced lightly against the ceilings of various exhibition spaces. But Parreno is also an artist who writes. Since the early 1990s he has used words, often foreign words, not French, as part of a quest for reality. He also frequently writes in English. This summer he made a film in which a machine copied the notes made by Marilyn Monroe in 1955 while she was staying at the Waldorf-Astoria. Words appear, embedded this time in a film about a person’s ability to live on as a ghost. Reality often seems supernatural in Parreno’s work.

His quest has taken various forms. In 2003, he went to Boulders Beach in South Africa, just beyond Cape Town, a beach full of penguins that he brought back as a picture in which he had scrawled the words *REALITY PARK* in big graffiti on the rocks. Reality here takes shape as a landscape of amusement. The penguins become his figure for community, for crowd. The picture took its few steps away from the usual forms of mass culture and stopped at the entrance to this Reality Park. That was all.

The next year, Parreno wrote a series of articles on landscapes for the magazine *Domus*. These landscapes were not pictures, not exhibitions, not spectacles. They affirmed no medium. He used a voice that seemed to be talking, ruminating, chatting across thoughts sweetly or sadly or flatly or sidewise before moving on. He got the idea to take this voice back to the penguins and share it with them. He went this time around to the penguins living in Patagonia. In order to succeed in his mission, he had to hunker down, become no taller than a penguin, join their crowd, and stay still. He perfected this skill. That was how he came to sit in their midst one March night and read his stories to them.

“Pasolini noticed,” he read, “that fireflies were starting to disappear from Europe in the 1950s. He

associated their disappearance with that of various ideologies. When people stop believing in the same thing, fireflies disappear, just like the creatures in *Fantasia*, nothingness conquered them.” A little later he read, “The Other is the one who has a nice penthouse on the Death Star.” He then skipped to a few hundred other topics—Gagarin the cosmonaut; Bruce Sterling; melancholy, shy objects; unblinking starlets crying.

At the time, Parreno was interested in an entirely new politics of attachment, in the possibility of new affects or a state “after” affect. He titled the series of *Domus* essays “After Affects.” This leads to the question: Were the penguins affected afterward?

All that remains of this speech dissolving into the penguins’ minds and the Argentinean night is another picture, an infrared photograph that shows the scene of a man reading far away, engulfed by inquisitive creatures. Only the title of the work tells us he is speaking to them. We come late to this landscape. We can only see it. We know we can see someone else seeing; we cannot see their hearing, not even with the advanced image technologies most associated with modern warfare’s night battles and missiles. This is a scene being made to go backward, a scene made mute, where seeing hearing becomes *s/hearing*, where hearing is lost, just like the speech, just like the words; all is shorn. We are kept outside this oral culture of man and beast. Yet nonetheless we see that there in the break is a reality of feeling outside words and outside techne, a reality on the brink, just outside the Antarctic Circle, where art does nothing more than live and breathe. Where it escapes the tropes of death and becomes one with mere life. Where nothing is owned. It has turned toward another kind of future. □

MOLLY NESBIT IS A PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY AT VASSAR COLLEGE AND A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*.

* Lucy Lippard, “Art Within the Arctic Circle,” *Hudson Review* 22, no. 4 (February 1970): 665–74. Reprinted in Lucy Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), 277–91; 286.