

Show & tell

Artist Philippe Parreno's exhibitions speak volumes

PHOTOGRAPHY: JONATHAN DE VILLIERS
WRITER: ALICE PFEIFFER

Speech bubble-shaped balloons crowding out the ceiling, panels of LED bulbs spread over the floor, cork boards covered with portraits of manga characters pinned on the walls: Philippe Parreno's loft studio space in Paris offers up an instant career retrospective, a scramble of his recurring tricks and tropes.

Sporting a white T-shirt, black-framed glasses and a trim beard, Parreno looks the quintessential Parisian bourgeois bohemian, although he was born in Oran, Algeria, and grew up in Grenoble. He is nonchalantly cool, unfazed by work-related tension. His show at Paris' [Palais de Tokyo](#), 'Anywhere, Anywhere Out of the World', over a year in the making, opens at the end of October.

The fact that he is the first artist to have the creative run of the Palais' 11,000 sq m exhibition space doesn't seem to concern him either. After all, this year he's already opened his 'Fade to Black' show in LA, had his first solo show in Russia, curated by Hans-Ulrich

Obrist, at Moscow's Garage Center, and choreographed 'The Bride and the Bachelors' at London's Barbican. Parreno is match fit.

What is preoccupying him is the interaction between space and object. 'It can be very difficult for me to make art because I think of things like how a shape becomes public, the impossibility of disconnecting a piece from its space, their mutual evolution over time. These questions are endless, and equally challenging in a huge or tiny show.'

Parreno has been asking himself these questions throughout his career. Part of a generation of artists and thinkers that emerged in France in the 1990s, spearheaded by art critics Éric Troncy and Nicolas Bourriaud, Parreno has pushed a distinct and hugely influential idea of what an art show can and should be. For him, the exhibition is less a collection of objects, static in space and time, than a carefully choreographed sequence of events, often produced collaboratively, with something like narrative drive, internal rhythm (and often using music and film), something that moves and shifts and changes meaning as it goes along.

For the 'Snow Dancing' show at the Consortium de Dijon (1995), he organised»

a happening the day before the opening. Guests had the soles of their shoes engraved with revolutionary slogans by a cobbler, so that as they walked around a room inside the consortium, they marked the floor. Subsequent visitors to the show were left to imagine how the marks got there. In a similar vein, for 'Werk Tisch I und II' (1995) he set up a workshop where participants made teddy bears and stuffed secret messages into their fluffy bodies. The entire scene was recorded and the show consisted of the bears watching their own beginnings in the world.

Parreno is planning a spectacle in sound and light for the upcoming Palais show. This will include the re-staging of an existing piece created with Liam Gillick in 2007: a white grand player piano mechanically reciting *Petrouchka*, the famously complex Stravinsky ballet, while black snow falls against a backdrop of heavy theatre curtains. 'It's like cheap magic tricks, which are the best kind.' Giant screens will only be visible if you stand far enough away, robotic doors will seamlessly travel around the space, all contributing to the impression of a half-remembered funfair.

For Palais de Tokyo president Jean de Loisy, Parreno's work is apposite for the exhibition space, which previously served as an archival centre, a cinema school, and the Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques (which, coincidentally, Parreno attended in the 1980s). 'Like the Palais, filled with traces and past lives, Parreno's work creates empty shells for your imagination to fill,' says Loisy.

One of Parreno's best known pieces is *No Ghost Just a Shell: Anywhere Out of the World*, created in 1999 with French artist Pierre Huyghe. The pair acquired the rights from a Japanese game developer to a 2D manga character, with no name and destined for brief, often fatal appearances. They named her Annlee and she went on to be the star of many films by the pair, giving her a new life, a different kind of future and a sense

of identity. She was also offered up to other artists. Annlee is set to make an appearance in Parreno's Palais show. 'It's the idea of creating a portrait that interests me,' says Parreno, 'not creating a critique of the media.'

Indeed, Parreno might be the master portrait-maker of the age. He and Scottish artist Douglas Gordon co-directed *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, which premiered during the Cannes Film Festival in 2006. The pair used 17 cameras to film the football player during a Real Madrid match, focusing exclusively on his body. It was a portrait of a man at work, totally focused despite the huge crowd. The soundtrack mixed screams of the crowds, commentary from Spanish TV presenters, the crunch of Zidane's boots in the turf, and 'songs', sometimes soaringly elegiac, sometimes screaming white noise by Scottish post-rock band Mogwai.

For *Marilyn* (2012), Parreno recreated the Waldorf Astoria hotel suite in New York that Monroe lived in during the 1950s. The camera filming a reconstruction of the room recreates her gaze, a computer recreates her voice and a robot imitates her handwriting. All are run by algorithms, ghosts in the machine. 'This was like creating the portrait of a ghost, like invoking a presence through multiple representations, without actually showing her,' says Parreno.

Uninterested in the distinctions between high and low art, Parreno has no qualms about using popular references in his work. 'The first *Die Hard* movie is a lot closer to my heart than Mondrian. As a kid I watched TV endlessly and it taught me one thing: either something is interesting or it's not. There is no point to theorise further,' he says.

Indeed, his passion for portrait-making is driven by a life-long love of both spectacle and experimentation. This is perhaps why he chooses to collaborate with professionals from cinema and music, like cinematographer Darius Khondji, who has worked with Woody

Allen, among other directors, and set designer Randall Peacock, who has worked with Mario Testino for Versace. 'To me, these are artists,' he says. 'You don't co-sign it, but the dialogue is ever more exciting.'

Parreno encourages these professionals to use their hands-on skills more experimentally, for example, asking sound composer and foley artist Nicolas Becker (who has worked on films such as *Batman Begins* and *The Pianist*) to invent music 'live', driven by what he sees as he watches Khondji's work. And, vice versa, Khondji's images are influenced by the sounds he hears. 'All the methods are total no-nos in other fields, but with Philippe, what counts more is the artistic gesture rather than the final result,' says Becker.

Parreno inevitably spends a lot of time on conference calls and makes one to Peacock while I am in the studio. 'My work is to truly understand what he wants,' says Peacock, 'especially when he isn't sure of it yet. Sometimes he'll say he doesn't know what he's doing, but really he does, he just doesn't know how to express it yet. In some ways my job is a little like a coach or a shrink.'

Call over, Parreno joins his team, which is busy deliberating between two panels of midnight blue that will be used as backdrops in the show. (The democratic studio set-up is as novel as Parreno's approach to his exhibitions.) Soon, the entire group takes off for *steak tartare-frites* at the local brasserie, chatting about football and French television. *Et pourquoi pas?* Either something is interesting or it's not. No need to theorise further. ★

'*Anywhere, Anywhere Out of the World*' is on at Palais de Tokyo from 23 October 2013 - 12 January 2014. www.palaisdetokyo.com

From Manga to Monroe

Embracing a football mega-star, a writing robot and glow-in-the-dark fluorescent ink, just a few of Parreno's eclectic greatest hits

1999

**Anywhere Out of the World**

From the project *No Ghost Just a Shell*, in which Parreno and Pierre Huyghe bought the rights to a doomed manga character and gave her new life. © Philippe Parreno

2006

**Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait**

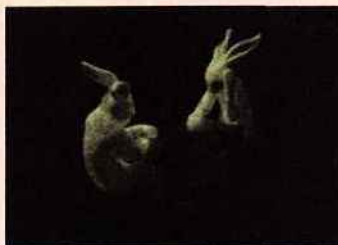
A still from Parreno's film made with Douglas Gordon, focusing entirely on French football player Zinedine Zidane throughout a Real Madrid match. 35mm, colour, sound, runtime 90 minutes, © Philippe Parreno and Douglas Gordon

2012

**Marilyn**

Having recreated Marilyn Monroe's New York Waldorf Astoria suite for a short film, Parreno had the camera serve as her gaze and, in this still, a robot imitates her writing. Colour, 19 minutes 49 seconds, © Philippe Parreno, courtesy Philippe Parreno, Pilar Corrias Gallery

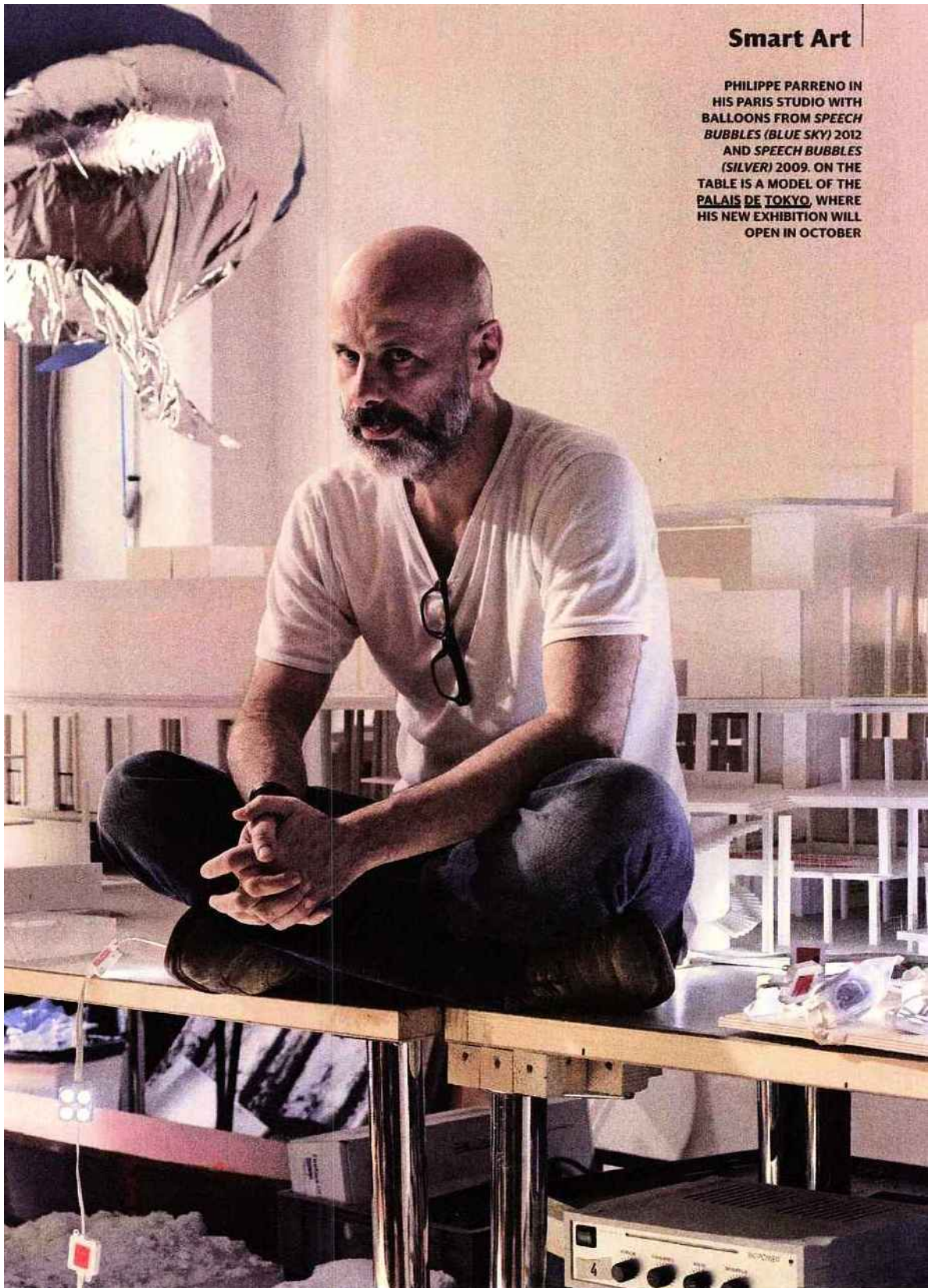
2013

**Fade to Black**

This series of seemingly blank posters reveals its images when, after initial exposure to light, they first glow in the dark, then fade again. © Philippe Parreno

'The first Die Hard is a lot closer to my heart than Mondrian'





Smart Art

PHILIPPE PARRENO IN HIS PARIS STUDIO WITH BALLOONS FROM *SPEECH BUBBLES (BLUE SKY)* 2012 AND *SPEECH BUBBLES (SILVER)* 2009. ON THE TABLE IS A MODEL OF THE **PALAIS DE TOKYO**, WHERE HIS NEW EXHIBITION WILL OPEN IN OCTOBER