

Philippe Parreno

PARK AVENUE ARMORY

“I wonder which is worse. To feel too busy or not busy enough.” This wistfully introspective not-quite question—included in a monologue delivered by a series of child actresses as part of Tino Seghal’s contribution to Philippe Parreno’s *H (N)Y P N(Y) OSIS*, 2015, a two-hour-plus-long multimedia scenario that was on view at the Park Avenue Armory this summer—had a very specific contextual function in the show’s overall scheme, but it also stood out for the way it cut to the heart of the conceptual and structural ambivalences that shadowed the project, and Parreno’s practice in general. Despite its lavish production values and deployment of almost every presentational modality currently operative in contemporary art, *H (N)Y P N(Y) OSIS* nevertheless fostered a deep and weirdly demanding sort of spectatorial languor. For viewers immersed within its exaggerated temporal and artifactual spaciousness, it played alternately like a strategic conjuring of richly multivalent phenomenological ambiances and a form of endurance test carried out via the most torpid and impatient-making tendencies of relational aestheticians. And at other times, it came off as a slightly shaky attempt to synthesize the two types of experience into some new brand of third-way mindfulness.



Parreno has increasingly focused his practice on an attempt to choreograph discrete elements of a given exhibition into a kind of grand *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Yet one upshot of this would seem to be an unavoidable sense of déjà vu, wherein his shows can end up feeling like reconfigured miniretrospectives, whether explicitly pitched as such or not, with numerous older works mixed with a few freshly commissioned ones. For the armory, Parreno created a long, hanging allée comprising twenty-seven marquees made between 2006 and 2015, all but one of them blank, at the end of which stood a bleacher-like viewing platform that slowly rotated beneath a trio of colossal projection screens. The lighted marquees—literally an array of floating signifiers, here assembled as a work titled *Danny the Street*, 2015—acted in oblique conjunction with a range of soundscapes in the space (which included recorded music and effects, street noise piped in from outside the building, prepared pianos, and occasional sequences of live performance by pianist Mikhail Rudy). A kind of effaced Great White Way, an empty spectacle full of light and heat but leached of any specific content, the street went on hiatus at various points in the show’s cycle when the screens descended from the building’s canopy to receive a series of the artist’s films and videos from the last half-dozen years or so. These included *June 8, 1968*, 2009, his reimagining of photographer Paul Fusco’s images of mourners viewing the railroad cortege that carried the body of Robert F. Kennedy between New York and Washington, DC, following his assassination; *Invisibleboy*, 2010, in which live footage and animation are combined to figure the world of a young boy living in Manhattan’s Chinatown as populated by apparitions and monsters; and his new *The Crowd*, 2015, an elegant if rather self-consciously portentous project shot in the armory with a throng of performers, many of whom were apparently hypnotized and then made party to some unseen, indeterminately enchanted occasion whose general shape suggested a kind of doppelgänger for *H (N)Y P N(Y) OSIS* itself.

More persuasive was *Marilyn*, 2012, an unnervingly patient tour of the Waldorf-Astoria hotel suite where the iconic actress of the title lived for part of 1955. It’s filmed from the perspective of and narrated by a computer-simulated Monroe, whose elegant handwriting—first seen slowly and then manically filling sheet after sheet of hotel stationery—is also a replication, produced by a robotic graphic device whose eerie spiderlike carriage is only revealed in the work’s final moments. In ways an analogue to one of Parreno’s best-known confections, Ann Lee—the “person” embodied in the melancholic performances of the aforementioned little girls, a Japanese manga character that was purchased by Parreno and Pierre Huyghe in 1999 and subsequently offered to other artists for use in their own projects—Monroe was also a kind of cartoon and commodity, a voluptuous subject-object whose nature was forever hopelessly out of sync with her presence. This disjunction between the real and the artificial (whether objects, emotions, or entities) lies at the core of Parreno’s investigations, and he does his best work there, looking for the uncanny slippages that can be provoked between the two states. It’s in these gaps between what one is and how one seems that Parreno’s work poses its most salient questions: not just about what it means to be one way or another but about what it means to *be* any way at all.

—Jeffrey Kastner