



# Philippe Parreno

*Interview by Tom Eccles*



Working across a wide range of media, French artist Philippe Parreno came to prominence during the 1990s and is known both for his collaborative approach to artmaking (with artists such as Liam Gillick, Douglas Gordon and Tino Sehgal) and for treating exhibitions as objects or artworks in themselves, rather than as a collection of discrete works, most notably in his 2013 solo exhibition *Anywhere, Anywhere Out of the World* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, and as cocurator of *Il Tempo del Postino* (2007–9), a group exhibition in which the participating artists sought to occupy time rather than space. Following his recent exhibition *H(N)Y P N(Y) OSIS* at the Park Avenue Armory in New York and in advance of a new solo show at Hangar Bicocca in Milan, *ArtReview* asked him to explore that process of exhibition-making with one of the New York show's curators, Tom Eccles.

**ARTREVIEW** *Your upcoming exhibition at Hangar Bicocca in Milan comes on the heels of two enormous projects: at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris two years ago and the Park Avenue Armory in New York this summer. How are they related?*

**PHILIPPE PARENNO** I didn't plan them as a trilogy, or in three chapters. They can't be related, because what I generally do is so specific to the place that will hold the exhibition. I don't 'travel' shows. I find it impossible. You know, I have always been occupied by the same question: how does a form appear and disappear in space and time? You could say that this is the ontology of the work: what script needs to be invented? Under which circumstances can it appear as a form and an author? To me the work and the exhibition are a permanent negotiation.

The Palais de Tokyo exhibition started with a *reading* – the same way that you might begin if you were working, let's say, on an urban plan. Indeed, it began more like an intervention in a landscape than in a building. We learned that the space was blind to the city: even though it's one of the most beautiful spots in Paris, it's actually a blind space. There is no access to the outside view, and the building is layered to the river. So it all started with a blind space, and a schizophrenic institution. When I started working on the exhibition, I did not have any plan other than to think – to think about an exhibition as a public garden. The exhibition belonged, in a way, to a building.

In the Palais de Tokyo there was a series of labels [on miniature screens] flickering with extracts from a book I wrote in 1995 called *Snow Dancing*, which Liam Gillick published with Jack Wendler. The book started with these words: 'We are in a big building, and something's about to happen. The original function of the building had been forgotten, but it remained, a certain aura.'

All I am trying to say is that the shows are *à propos*: they are quite specific. The Armory went in another direction. If the Palais de Tokyo was conceived as a garden, then I approached the Armory like a plaza, because it's an entire block of Manhattan. The *reading* of the space was quite easy to do: the Armory is a city block; how do you transform it into a public space? You leave it open, but then how do you produce attention and time in an open space?

You have a given volume, and you want to produce the maximum of time in it. It's actually the same topological problem you face if you want to produce an efficient voltaic pile. You have to increase the percentage points of electrolytes in a limited volume. I like to think about a space as a battery. The Palais de Tokyo was much more about parallel events running throughout a promenade in a consistent Euclidean space. You couldn't actually see the space in one glance, but rather through a *parcours*. At the Armory, you had to embrace the space entirely right

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when you entered, so it became much more of a linear journey that folds itself in a Riemannian space [a branch of differential geometry that enabled Einstein's general theory of relativity].

**AR** *What lessons did you learn, or more generally, what have you taken away from those two exhibitions that will inform what you do in Milan?*

**PP** At Hangar Bicocca, the exhibition pays less attention to the architecture. It's again a space that fits pretty well with the ideas in *Snow Dancing*. There's a legacy of transforming these kinds of industrial spaces into art centres. The story in *Snow Dancing* begins with the depiction of a building in which a party is going to take place, as well as a series of speculative comments regarding the past function of the historical site. The Magasin in Grenoble, where I grew up as an art student, was exactly that kind of space. So Hangar Bicocca is familiar, and this familiarity allows me to be more intimate or reflective. The show is called *Hypothesis*, so it's an attempt to explain or understand. I don't know what yet, precisely...

There is something interesting that I would like to develop in Milan with the *Marquee* series [2006–, in which the artist explores space through experiments with light and the format of the traditional cinema marquee]. So I will start with the *Marquees*, and see where it leads me. At the Armory we tried to assemble those objects into a coherent ensemble, into a functioning musical instrument. They became a gamelan. A gamelan is an Indonesian instrument that is made out of different objects. I don't even really look at the *Marquees* like objects any more: they become puppets, automata.

They are like those creatures invented by [Stéphane] Mallarmé just because they sound great in a poem. A 'ptyx' for example is defined as '*Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore*', which translates as 'Abolished shell whose resonance remains'. I like to think about the *Marquees* as 'abolished shells'. It sounds great! *Marquees* are ptyx!

I would not say that the *Marquees* produce music but musical anagrams to a certain extent. Tino Sehgal composed a piece in Paris for them. But in New York some musicians came after the opening hours of the exhibition to play the ensemble. Liam Gillick came one morning to play; Thomas Bartlett, Robert A.A. Lowe came a couple of times. So I have some great material to play with.

In Milan the show now starts with a set designed by Jasper Johns for the Merce Cunningham piece called *Walkaround Time* [1968]. The *Marquees* look like those set designs, they cast shadows: it's a beautiful series of objects. There will be a Disklavier piano, the travelling light of *Solaris Chronicles* [a 2014 exhibition at the Luma Foundation in Arles, based around the models of architect Frank Gehry] that I did with Liam Gillick, also producing moving shadows. Lined up among the *Marquees* there will be a film called *Mont Analogue* [2001], which is made out of monochromatic stills, projected with no lens. And the musical composition will be central to the show: I would like to see how the *Marquees* might even produce the soundtrack of movies.

**AR** *You've always maintained that the artwork can never be separated from its own mode of display. Can you explain that further?*

**PP** It's true for any artform: there was a time when a painting formed a world in itself, so the accumulation of canvases hung next to each other did not ruin their individual valuation. The modern artistic sensibility started to envision holes and leave spaces in between the works. The artwork became incomplete. It's a quasi-object; it becomes an object only when exposed, and each 'exposition' will change it. Like those objects used in rituals in Mali. Each time they come out they appear to be different because



*above* *Anywhere, Anywhere, Out of the World*, 2013 (installation view, Palais de Tokyo, Paris).  
Photo: Andrea Rossetti. © and courtesy the artist

*preceding pages* *H (N) Y P N (Y) OSIS* (installation view, Park Avenue Armory, New York).  
Photo: Andrea Rossetti. © and courtesy the artist



*Solaris Chronicles*, 2014 (installation view, Luma Foundation, Arles).  
Photo: Andrea Rossetti. © and courtesy the artist



*Marquee Tirana*, 2015,  
metal frame, neon, LED, opalescent Plexiglas, 1200 × 400 × 83 cm.  
© and courtesy the artist

the priest ‘feeds’ them when retrieved from the ceremony. When they come back in front of our eyes, the object is different. Paintings age, colours fade and museography affects them. They’re not finished. There is an incompleteness theorem in mathematics that goes along those lines. The emergence of the exhibition as a public spectacle in the nineteenth century set up a new genre, we see the emergence of a new type of reflexive judgement, but also interrogations of the strategies of display, of how a public is addressed, of the techniques of installation and the kind of narrative that is staged in the so-called Salon. These investigations have, for a few decades now, become an established part of art history, as well as a resource for contemporary curatorial studies.

AR *It’s interesting that your work (and that of a generation of artists) often comes under the umbrella of that horrible term ‘relational aesthetics’, which we all tend to understand as: ‘the work is not complete without the audience’, or ‘the work is completed by the audience’. So I’d like to ask, because I don’t think it’s necessarily true, and it seems to me that you’re making the work for the work itself, and for yourself: do you consider the audience in the work, in the exhibition?*

PP The participation of the viewer in mechanisms of exhibition staging is interesting but not central. The manual and mechanical experimentations by Frederick Kiesler that introduced the temporal visibility of an artwork were really interesting. The subject/object interaction was more immaterial or virtual. Another important moment for me was [Jean-François] Lyotard’s exhibition *Les Immatériaux* [1985]. *Les Immatériaux* proposed a new way of articulating concepts and intuitions – a new way to understand the ubiquity of ‘immaterials’. What a strange thing: a philosophy that itself takes on the form of an exhibition. Could there be a way to understand, or rather *do*, philosophy *spatially*, so that the exhibition medium would present a possible solution to the problems of conceptual articulations, which thereby would cease to be purely conceptual, and instead come to invest in the field of the sensory, tactile, auditory and visual?

Some years ago Matthew Barney said something really important. He said that our generation used video cameras not to make films but to measure art in time. I like that sentence.

To go back to your question, I don’t like the word audience. I don’t think that as an artist you relate to an audience. I don’t want to deal with an audience. It’s not my problem. The public is another matter. There is dialectical difference.

AR *What is the difference between the audience and the public?*

PP You can find an audience for pretty much anything. A public comes together. When you go to see a movie, you’re always a bit embarrassed by the people in front of you, because you want to chop off their heads in order to read the subtitles. This is the audience. When I go into an exhibition, or a museum, I don’t mind the presence of the other. They are part of it; in a way, they are before you in time, not in space. They know a bit more than you, and the ones behind you came after you and know a bit less. So you negotiate your core presence, so there’s something a bit aristocratic

PP There is dramaturgy at work that contributes to the dematerialisation of the object in the gallery. The interest of an exhibition is that it’s impossible to capture or visualise in a single photograph. Towards the end of the *parcours* at the Palais de Tokyo you could see the control room, in which the computers were commanding every event in the exhibition. The authority of the control room is undeniable, and yet the key to the project was the ability of the dramaturgy to reprogram constantly through disruptions, fragmented moments, human contingencies



in the reading of an artwork, because you are in charge of your own time, and yet you need the other. So the public is on the side of the other, while the audience is on the side of the spectacle.

AR *What about the idea of duration in these exhibitions? Because the pace of the exhibitions is very important. Many descriptions of the exhibitions have used this term ‘immersive’, but I’m not sure they are immersive, and they’re not a cacophony, they’re a polyphony.*

*The Crowd* (still), 2015, digital 65mm, colour, sound mix 5.1, aspect ratio 1.10, 24 min. © the artist. Courtesy Pilar Corrias, London; Gladstone Gallery, New York & Brussels; Esther Schipper, Berlin

and outside phenomena leaking in. There was no way to escape the control room, but there is a possibility to reprogram its structure – a structure that triggered interactions between objects and subjects and impacted your own agency in turn.

Baroque architecture invented the notion of a ‘scripted space’. A *trompe-l’oeil* after all is a marker in time. It appears in time. So an exhibition creates a temporary community, for an hour or two, based on unregulated behaviours, and that’s what, for me, was interesting to address in Park Avenue more than in the Palais de Tokyo.

AR *At the Armory, you made a film called The Crowd [2015] that seems to play upon the tension between individuality and collectivity, both in terms of being in space, but...*

PP ... it's not a film about singularities. Films may by definition be about singularities: in my case *Marilyn, Invisible Boy, June 8, 1968, AnnLee*. But *AnnLee* was different already: it had a symbiotic value. The project was all about how a sign – in that case a manga character – can produce a collectivity. *The Crowd* takes that direction. Of course it was

know? I will never sign a work, ever. I dropped a lot of these things through a series of negotiations. I negotiated my coming out as an artist! I was not against the production of objects, I always liked art objects, but the project was more important to me. Your subjectivity is defined by a project, through a conversation developing a project. Literally projecting yourself.

AR *When one thinks of your generation, one thinks of a group of artists who are antagonistic, or maybe better, agonistic towards institutions, and today not only are*

PP Yes I do... Some should. I remember Liam Gillick sitting in a curator's office designing the press release. He will do that really naturally, because it is part of the essence of his work, to do that. I'm interested in the exhibition as a process, as a way to understand things, ideas, as a way to formulate ideas.

In the case of Albania, Edi Rama, the prime minister, sent me a message after the election saying, 'I have this idea that the prime minister's building should be open to the public, because it has been closed, it was a place of secrecy. I think your ghost of a marquee would be a great sign to send to the population that we open the place, actually open the archive, and we are working upstairs, where people can freely come in and out. It will not be a place that's super highly guarded – of course there will be some guards – but people will be able to freely access the building where I am working.' I found it really fascinating, because when I saw it yesterday, the object found its meaning.

AR *It found its meaning?*

PP Or to say it the other way around: I think it became rather clear that they did not have much meaning to begin with. Again, my work is never about anything, but about finding the condition for something to happen. I remember starting to design flashing labels in an exhibition because I was interested in the way institutions were framing your attention to an artwork. You know, traditionally in a museum, you can see something for three months, and then it disappears, but that is never decided by the artist, this is true for a painting too, painting disappears too, nothing is permanent. An artwork follows some contingencies: it follows a ritual. So all these things were, for me, a starting point of my relation to art, in which narration is written... by whom? I started to see art as spectres, spectres coming from the past but also from the future. To go back to the *Marquees*, they were labels: they were where a naming device and the labels became the artwork. So it's a bit like in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, where the aliens replace men one by one, identical to humans but aliens. Now I have one *Marquee* for one film.

AR *Many times I've been with you, and we've been in meetings, and you've said, "Well, why don't we just do something extraordinary?" What for you is extraordinary?*

PP It's true I say that. I realise that I say that. I am not sure what it means. Let's leave that question suspended. Words, words, words... ar

Philippe Parreno: Hypothesis *is on show*  
at Hangar Bicocca, Milan, 22 October – 14 February



also dictated by the space. It was filmed within the Drill Hall of the Park Avenue Armory. I wanted to have that kind of mirror effect. The film was a pre-vision – a pre-visualisation – of the upcoming exhibition. I invited a group of people to come to see a show at the Armory that did not exist yet...

AR *You've talked about the poetics of the work, and the metaphysics or ontology of the work: what are the politics of your work?*

PP In the end the politics is folded within the poetic. I have stated, for example, there will never be any pictures of my work, because there will be no work, only a collective project, you

*you showing at major institutions, and in formats that you're determining, but you are to some extent determining the format of surveys of your work. You're trying to think, 'How do I make those kind of institutional statements?' in some ways, but also you've been involved in a number of the projects with institutions, in terms of building institutions. Over the summer you opened a space with Anri Sala and with Carsten Höller in the prime minister's office in Tirana, creating a Centre for Openness and Dialogue, and also trying to build an art collection for the country of Albania. For the facade of the entrance you have given a large Marquee. How does this make you think differently as an artist, and do you think artists should be involved in institution-building?*