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ART & DESIGN

# In Philippe Parreno's 'H{N}Y P N(Y}OSIS,' Art Is the Big Idea

By **RANDY KENNEDY** JUNE 4, 2015

When he was young, the French artist Philippe Parreno had a fantasy in which he would open his mouth and a beam of projector light would shoot out, casting his thoughts onto whatever was in front of him, medium and message in one human head. "My imagination would just be easy and available," he once told the computer scientist Jaron Lanier.

For more than 20 years, Mr. Parreno's imagination has been abundantly available in shows that seek, with a kind of operatic flair, to upend the sense of what an art exhibition can be: a moving sculpture you can sit on; a piece consisting of a talking ventriloquist and dancing curtains; another in which the temperature in a gallery plummets and an immense snowdrift slowly reveals itself. As the snowdrift might suggest, such pieces have never been easy, for art institutions or for art-goers raised mostly on painting and sculpture that stay politely in place, asking for little beyond contemplation.

When the Park Avenue Armory opens "H{N}Y P N(Y}OSIS," Mr. Parreno's largest installation to date in the United States, on June 11, it will be the first time American audiences have been ushered fully into his world, one infused with foreboding doses of postmodern French philosophy — Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze — but also with the immersive, compellingly creepy feel of a good dystopian science-fiction movie.

Almost every part of the imposing Armory building will be put to use for his purposes: the skylight blinds will rise and descend to create periods of darkness and light; the exterior walls will be fitted with microphones, to bring in amplified street sounds, which will be translated into piano music that will cause interior lights to surge, flicker and dim along with the urban thrum; immense screens will

be used for films but also as floating walls; and the trusses will be hung with more than two dozen of Mr. Parreno's signature sculptural pieces, translucent ghostly marquees that look as if they were severed from their worldly theatrical origins and elevated to Platonic form.

"He isn't the kind of artist who wants to put something on the wall," said Tom Eccles, the executive director of Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies and a consulting curator for the Armory project. "He wants to take down the wall and put up his own wall. There's almost a kind of wanton provocation to push art institutions as far as they can go."

It's partly the reason that Mr. Parreno and a close-knit group of European artists who came of age together in the 1990s — among them Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Douglas Gordon and Pierre Huyghe (who has just taken over the Metropolitan Museum of Art's roof garden) — have only recently come to greater attention in the United States.

While they have become the darlings of powerful American galleries — the Gladstone Gallery, which represents Mr. Parreno; Gagosian; Marian Goodman; 303 — their work usually demands more control than American art institutions are willing to cede. The effect, which has made them among the most influential artists of their generation in Europe, is the creation of exhibitions conceived as works of art unto themselves. Objects, music, film, performance and architecture are woven together, so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Like their Conceptualist forebears in the 1960s and 1970s, these artists question objects as the sole conveyors of art, and their work is heavily shaped by the theoretical. ("Ideas alone can be works of art," as Sol LeWitt said.)

But while this often led the older generation — artists like Hans Haacke, Hanne Darboven and Robert Barry — to work that was visually spare, or barely there, the younger artists have embraced the tools of spectacle — lights, camera, action — and tried to turn them to purposes that push back against mass culture.

In an interview, Mr. Parreno, 50, a bald, intensely professorial presence who speaks thickly accented, highly allusive English, described his thinking about art exhibitions as "a space that will unfold into time."

He compared the idea to a battery, in which a certain amount of space contains a certain amount of power, but what is really produced is time. His generation, he added, was one of the first to grow up making shows less often in museums than in buildings that had been repurposed into giant indeterminate art receptacles, like the Armory. "It's good for everything and nothing, it's a place left

over, a place where the function gets forgotten.” And so the function can take whatever form he desires, he said, adding, “An air-conditioned dark space is always the space for fiction.”

Since the Armory was converted six years ago into a kunsthalle-type space for temporary exhibitions, Mr. Parreno is the only artist who will be taking on its immensity — a 55,000 square-foot drill hall, ceilings rising to 85 feet — after having recently commanded an even more daunting space, to considerable critical approval. In the fall of 2013, he transformed more than 200,000 square feet of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, where he lives and works, into a walk-in environment, called “Anywhere, Anywhere, Out of the World,” in which visitors could get lost among the labyrinthine offerings. That Mr. Parreno was, when mounting the Paris show, still recovering from cancer treatments made it seem like even more of a feat, a bombastic act of resistance.

Many of the individual pieces from Palais de Tokyo will be reconfigured for the Armory show, which remains on view through Aug. 2. A 2012 film installation, “Marilyn,” conjures up a ghostly, stream-of-consciousness portrait of Marilyn Monroe, recreating her voice with a computer and showing through “her” eyes a version of the suite at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, where Monroe once lived for several months. Another film work features Annlee, a Japanese manga character to which Mr. Parreno and Mr. Huyghe bought the rights in 1999 for 46,000 yen (about \$400 then) and proceeded to make her into a kind of open-source virtual cipher that they have shared with other artists. (In run-throughs for the Armory installation, her world-weary, Gen X voice could be heard on computer screens, intoning: “I am a product. A product freed from the marketplace I was supposed to fill.”)

The Armory project also reprises Mr. Parreno's collaborations with the cinematographer Darius Khondji, production designer Randall Peacock, sound designer Nicolas Becker, fellow artist Tino Sehgal and the pianist Mikhail Rudy, who will perform Ligeti, Feldman, Ravel and Scriabin, among others, during the installation.

On a gray day last January, Mr. Rudy was on hand at the Armory, at a gleaming black Steinway grand piano, for the filming of a new work specifically for this installation called “The Crowd,” for which Mr. Parreno had recruited about 100 extras. As the camera rolled, he choreographed them milling and migrating like purgatorial souls around the drill hall floor, which he had made crepuscular with blinds and a smoke machine.

When the film is shown during the installation, it will seem to viewers as if they were somehow watching a filmed version of their own presence in the Armory space — a film made in the past depicting a future that is their present. The difference is that the viewers, unlike many of the extras in the film, will not be hypnotized, a touch Mr. Parreno included in an apparent nod to the exhibition's hard-to-spell title — it is pronounced “hypnosis” — and to the overall mesmeric spirit of the show. (When I asked an assistant at the Gladstone Gallery whether she could tell which of the extras had been hypnotized, she said no, but added, “I did notice that some of them seemed to be particularly well behaved.”)

Mr. Parreno has sometimes been criticized for being both too theory-laden and too theatrical. But Nancy Spector, the deputy director and chief curator of the Guggenheim Museum, who featured Mr. Parreno's work in a 2008 exhibition, “theanyspacewhatever,” said that on the most basic level he was a storyteller, one whose narratives are “pure potentiality, without resolution.”

“It's a resistance to any kind of codification or narrative closure,” she said, “and a resistance to — how do I say this nicely? — an art world that wants quick fixes. Yet he accomplishes what he's after with this incredibly beautiful, seductive form.”

Mr. Parreno sometimes describes the effect as the making of a film that is always in postproduction, and one morning last week that film was beginning to come together. Inside the Armory, 26 of his spectral marquees had been suspended from the girders in two rows, evoking a theater-lined street. At the end of this street stood a set of bleachers on a circular platform that rotates slowly, allowing viewers nearby to see everything transpiring around them, while making them into a thing to be seen.

“It's part of the grammar we were given in the 20th century — the marquee, the seating, the exhibition hall,” said Mr. Parreno, who had arrived from Paris the previous night and, coffee in hand, was zipping around the drill hall from conclave to urgent conclave like Marcello Mastroianni in “8 1/2,” minus the hat and bullhorn. All of the moving parts of the exhibition — the films, the music, the moving screens, the pulsing light of the marquees, a live performance conceived by Mr. Sehgal — will work together in sequences that will change over the course of the installation, so that they will seem never to settle into any kind of recognizable pattern. “We're trying to build the idea of a cycle that doesn't repeat,” he said.

The overall feeling of the works he was orchestrating — “The Crowd,” the

Marilyn installation and a 2009 work that evokes the funeral train that carried Robert F. Kennedy's body from New York to Washington — was openly death-haunted. Mr. Parreno parries most personal questions with a particular kind of French impatience, and he deflects questions about biographical impulses in his work almost as well. But he did go to a computer and show dozens of examples of dark, Goya-like drawings that he made and gave away as gifts during his battle with cancer — of fireflies, which fascinate him because of their otherworldly ability to communicate with light and because human light pollution has taken a toll on their fragile populations.

He was thinking about incorporating a firefly animation into the Armory exhibition, he said, but was not sure yet if he would. “Or at least I’m not going to say yet if I will,” he said slyly, adding, “An exhibition needs a bit of liturgy and it also needs a bit of chance.”

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