



# PHILIPPE PARRENO

## new rituals

interview

and

photography by OLIVIER ZAHM

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Philippe Parreno wears a made-to-measure  
gray wool and silk jacket BRIONI

One of the most unpredictable, enigmatic, and intellectually rigorous artists on the scene today, Frenchman Philippe Parreno first gained recognition for his collaborations with artists of his generation, including Douglas Gordon, Liam Gillick, and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. Early on, he based his aesthetic stance on the exhibition as art form, and he has stuck to it without compromise.

By transcending any single category and including many, from performance to multimedia installations to cinema, Parreno has since won considerable international recognition with groundbreaking exhibitions at the Palais de Tokyo (2013-14), the Park Avenue Armory (2015), and Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan (2015-16). With each, he revealed the amplitude and force of his unique interpretation of dystopian reality through sensory perception. His next exhibition opens in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in October 2016.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I wanted to start by taking a moment to remember the artist Jean-Luc Vilmouth, who was a close friend to us in the early days at *Purple*. He left us in December 2015, in a hotel in Taipei. Jean-Luc Vilmouth, to whom you also owe quite a bit, would ask a question that concerns you as well: “How to inhabit the world?”

PHILIPPE PARRENO — His death came as a surprise to us. A heart attack in his sleep. In any case, I have very fond memories of Jean-Luc. He would ponder the question of the world in a very naive and beautiful way. I’m trying to see how I understood it then and how I would understand it now.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is it a question that’s on your mind as you plan out the nocturnal, enigmatic worlds of your exhibitions? When we started out together, in the 1990s, we were curious about the world. We had a thirst to go abroad that was tied to a desire to follow the world in the flux of its modernity or progress. Today, the world is adrift and torn by regression, violence, and fear.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — One of the first things I did was a demonstration in a school courtyard with children crying, “No more reality!”

OLIVIER ZAHM — It was an emblematic work.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes, and I come back to it all the time. Reality, as we all know, does not exist. There are multiple realities and universes. So, maybe that is the purpose of art: to populate the world with multiple realities through new forms or other kinds of exhibitions. Jean-Luc Vilmouth had a very romantic way of looking at the world, and the animal world. It was a very 19th-century

way of looking at things. Today, we’re watching the nonhuman world develop before us. The world isn’t necessarily human anymore. We’re living in a time when we’re starting to take an interest in what is not on the order of the human.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Are you nostalgic at all?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Not at all. Nor am I very optimistic. That’s why I’m still attached to the “no future” ideology of the punk movement, while remaining certain that the future will be interesting.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is the future something you think about?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes. The future is very problematic — just as much as the present, in fact. When we met, in the early 1990s, we were hyper-conscious of the present, compared with the generation before us, which still had a Modernist view of art. We took as great an interest in an *i-D* article as in a Witold Gombrowicz theory. We were concerned with the present in all its forms. Me, I was just as interested in art history as I was in what was happening in literature or cinema. That’s what set us apart. For us, it was like a very open field. The matter of the specialized language of art was something to be swept away. We were interested in all forms of language, as well. Cinema interested me, of course, but I was also fascinated with, say, magic — in other words, with other ways of understanding the world, and thus necessarily other ways of inhabiting it, regardless of the usual rules and their tendency to unify everything. That’s what art represents for me: it’s what prevents unification, what prevents



Danny the Street (detail), 2015, and The Crowd (still), 2015, exhibition view: Philippe Parreno, "H {N}Y P N(Y) OSIS" at the Park Avenue Armory, New York, photo by Andrea Rossetti, copyright Philippe Parreno, courtesy of Pilar Corrias, Barbara Gladstone, and Esther Schipper



understanding of the universe. It's friction and resistance.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's the idea that art, as a form of friction, puts up resistance.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Exactly. Resistance in a constant flow, an infinite flow. The Internet is the same sort of thing. The spaces of creation are encrypted spaces. At some point, the flow must stop so that a form can emerge from the traffic. There must be an interruption. Then the endless flow starts up again, and then it's stopped once more. More and more, I see the world as an interruption: rhythm and arrhythmia. Things stop and start, stop and start. It's a kind of rhythm whose pulsations draw your attention at a given moment and then free you from that attention.

OLIVIER ZAHM — These interruptions are moments of friction: nonviolent friction, let us specify, like the flipside of terrorism. They're pauses and also enigmas. They interrupt the flow of information, which we've known, since [Gilles] Deleuze, consists of orders, of instructions from power.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — It reminds me of the complex concept of "holophrase," to which a psychoanalyst introduced me when we were together at the Villa Arson in the mid-1990s. It appears in Book VII of [Jacques] Lacan's seminars. It's the moment when there is no more friction; it's a kind of perfect exchange. The difference between the signified and the signifier vanishes. You say, "I am ill," and the very moment you say it, you are ill. And Lacan used to speak of the "frozen image." For there to be form, there must be halts. It was, perhaps, a way to convey that. It's a rhythm and also a reprise.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Your exhibition was nothing but that. Brutal musical interruptions, electrical blackouts, images and films that would stop and start, and then crackling. And then the lights would come back on, and then everything would start up again in the dark.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Light is a form of electrical resistance, as well. You have a flow, and you have a resistance. The resistance leads to a light. It's a metaphor that we've been manipulating since the 19th century and that still works.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's the same with sound in Jean-Luc Godard's films, which you very much admire. He sculpted the interruptions and noises that cover up the story and the dialogue, like the sound of an airplane passing overhead.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — His last film, *Goodbye to Language*, in 3-D, is incredible. There's a very, very

beautiful scene with the film's protagonist couple: a woman and a man, and between them there's a dog. The dog embodies the drama. Godard films his dog. It's in 3-D. At one point, a lovely thing happens. The woman and man speak, yell at each other. The woman storms off to the right and the man to the left. The stereoscopy, the depth vision, is shut off, so that it feels like your eyes are going off in two different directions. It goes off in both directions, and you can no longer follow. It's pretty fabulous for a guy his age. So, yes, rhythmic reprise, synchrony, and then asynchrony.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You've always said, since the beginning, that you don't work on the art object and its presentation alone, or even on the installation, but on the very idea of exhibition in all its dimensions — sound, light, architecture, images, etc. Because for you, exhibition is a medium in itself, a language of its own. Does it seem to you that you're the only one thinking of exhibition in this radical way?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — The word "installation" has always fallen short for me. Why go looking for some other word than "exhibition" in the first place? Even if someone, wanting to be kind, says to me, "Exhibitions aren't what you do — you do more than exhibitions," I still hold to that reality. Back when I started, people would say to me, "That's not art." For example, a state collection refused to purchase the video *Snaking* for that reason. Later, they told me that I wasn't an artist because I collaborated with other artists. Now, 30 years later, they tell me I "don't do exhibitions." So I say, "Leave me alone!" I do exhibitions. These exhibitions are art and done by an artist. We've got to stop with the neologisms because otherwise we'll end up leaving art to the painters and exhibitions to the exhibition of objects or artistic products. It gets us nowhere. After all, ever since the 19th century, there's been an avant-garde in various forms — forms, incidentally, that have brought up new ways of thinking about the production of artistic forms, ways that fall outside the framework of objects, paintings, or sculptures, that follow something other than the 18th-century aesthetic agenda.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And the impact of those forms on the world...

PHILIPPE PARRENO —

**I'm not giving up on the idea that the forms we invent, the art**

**that we do, can still have an impact on the world — or maybe even change it! Why not?**

We've got to hang on to some shred of hope and ambition. Otherwise, what happens is really terrible. At times, we feel that we've all gone to hell — or that we've found a little air-conditioned room with free drinks where we can still smoke a cigarette or a little marijuana, and we tell ourselves that everything's all right — but nobody believes this anymore. The forms of today's regressions are of monstrous proportions. But I'm not going to let that stop me. In fact, I don't think everything's been understood yet about the questions we were asking back when we started out, in the 1990s — which are nevertheless rather simple questions.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Would it be fair to say that you have an "exhibition theory?"

PHILIPPE PARRENO — I like the idea of an "exhibition theory." It's like the *politique des auteurs* ["auteur theory"].

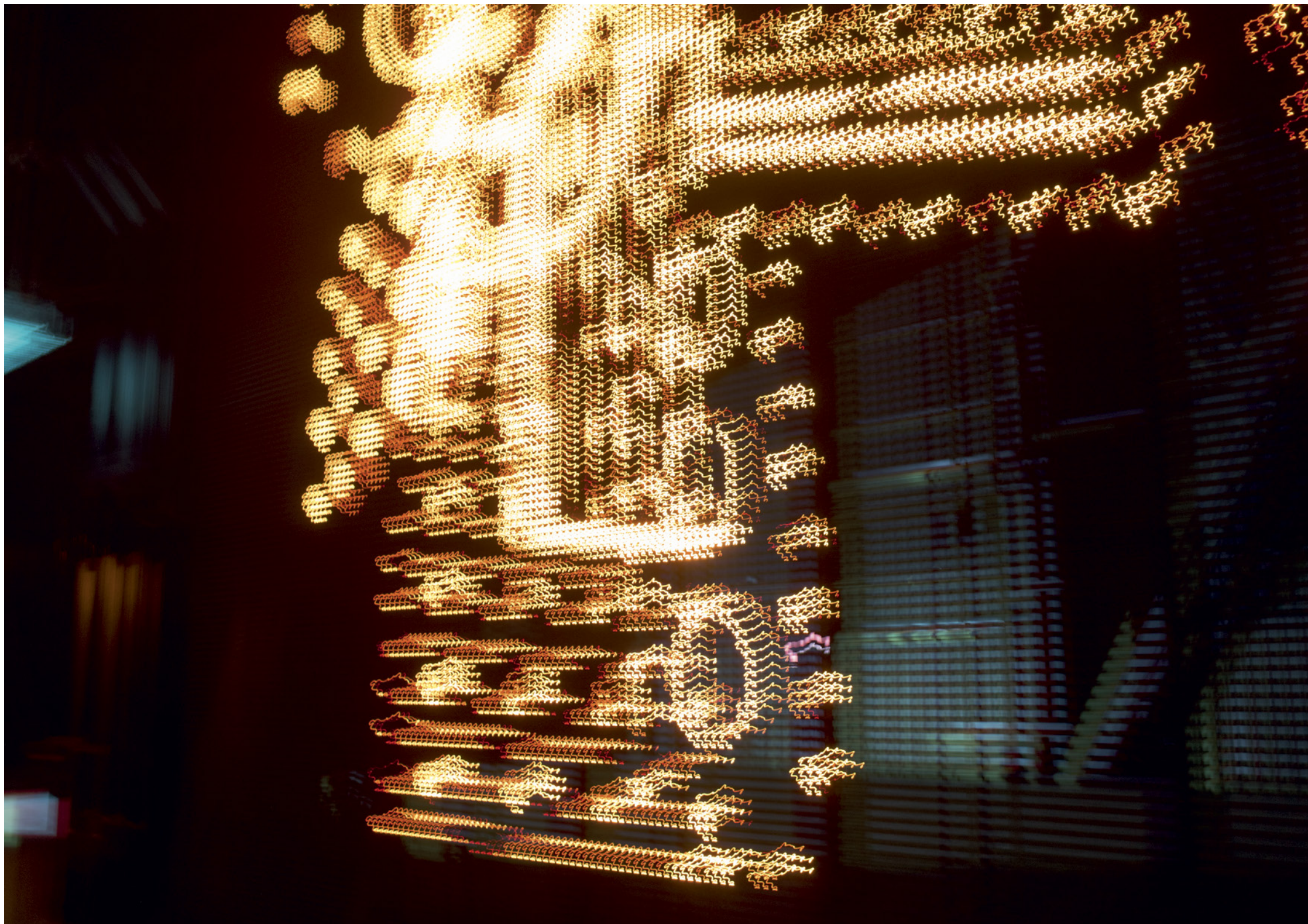
OLIVIER ZAHM — It's just that you've committed totally to the idea of exhibition. For you, it's just as serious as making a film or designing a building. It's not just a presentation of works, or a display of art objects.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes. That's all we've got these days. We have to stop thinking of art objects altogether. There's no point to it. We've been through it already. Whether the object is there or not there makes no difference, in fact. What changes is the way you address the public.

OLIVIER ZAHM — At the same time, though, your blinking luminous sculptures — which you call your "marquees" — has now become the signature for your work. Do you consider them as art objects or sculpture?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — A quasi-object... The idea for the marquees comes from an exhibition at Esther Schipper. It's the result of an extension or exaggeration of the placard. The placard has always been a problem for me. What to call the artwork of an artwork? What title to give it? What gives a work of art its name is, finally, the institution, the art merchant. That particular design belongs to the institution or to trade. I thought I needed to take a stab at that design. Mathias and Michael





Exhibition view: Philippe Parreno, "Hypothesis" at Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, photo by Olivier Zahm

[M/M Paris] had made me some luminous placards that blinked, at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1992-93. I remembered them and said to myself, "Why not remove the title and keep only the light, the rhythm, and the blinking?" So the forms that you now call my formal "signature," an artistic product, were born of the idea of the placard and a rejection of naming. They are outgrowths of my work. Blurbs that have substituted for works of art, that were supposed to name the work and in fact have survived it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's a terminal sign?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes. It's a "ptyx," as [Stéphane] Mallarmé used to say. "Ptyx" is a word that doesn't exist, a pure signifier, a word that's just there because at some point the poet happened to need it for a poem, because it sounded good. So it's a kind of ptyx, a thing with a ring to it, because the marquees aren't just sources of light; they're also sources of sound. They decorate the parlors or apartments of collectors, and why not? But if I gather marquees together, they become a musical instrument. They start making noise together and trading rhythms.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It becomes a sort of urban landscape, as well.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes, precisely. The first time I brought them together was at the Palais de Tokyo. They have a name when they get together. They're called *Danny the Street*, after the famous English transvestite singer [Danny La Rue] who died in 2009. "Danny the Street" is also a comic-book character created by Grant Morrison, also in tribute to Danny La Rue. He's an incredible character: he's both the setting of the story — an actual street — and a character. In other words, the character comes to a street and manifests himself by changing the shops and the shop windows. It's a transvestite and omniscient street. He changes the facades and the decor, and starts talking through the signs.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Setting and character become one.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes, precisely. It's a beautiful idea. The assembly of marquees produces something of that transvestite character.

OLIVIER ZAHM — A somewhat ghostly character, too.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes, of course. It's a dead character, as well.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So those light sculptures are like placards betokening the absence of a name, of a title, for the work, and the lighting of a scene, a street, a story. And so

they're in fact objects that are iconic of your work and at the same time instruments.

PHILIPPE PARRENO —

**Right. The marquee is a "quasi-object," in fact. It becomes an art object when it is part of a private or institutional collection, but otherwise it takes part in an exhibition.**

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's also a luminous musical instrument.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — I've started to make keyboards linked to marquees. Each has its sound, and now you can really play them. Each light, each frequency of light, is also a frequency of sound. So you can literally play the marquees.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You hit a note, and it lights up in a certain way?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes. This summer, we had musicians come to New York to play the marquees, and I think we're going to make an album with them.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is it a scientist doing this?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — No. We gradually put it all together at the studio. It took a year and a half of research, and now it works. You need 15 keyboards to get the marquees to work with musicians. We did it at night in New York this summer. Antony Hegarty's pianist was on hand. It was a pretty lovely evening. It's like a synthesizer, and the light gets into the rhythm. If you think in terms of instruments, the closest thing to it is the gamelan, the Indonesian and Balinese instrument. The gamelan is in fact several small percussion instruments. You have one that's the size of this table, another that's smaller, and so on. To play it, you need a lot of musicians, but it's not thought of in the same way as a harp or a violin. It's just a piece of this added to a piece of that, and it ends up making a single instrument



played by several musicians, but led by a single person: the *dalang*, a sort of spiritual figure who conducts the ensemble. It's a fairly strange object made of various other objects.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's a one-instrument orchestra.  
PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes. It's the closest thing you can imagine to the ensemble of marquees.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How did you start integrating music into your exhibitions — with player pianos, for example?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Those were shifts in thinking or reasoning. To control events in a space, I needed to create a code to synchronize the events and the sounds and the lights that flashed across the exhibition or gave it its rhythm. At the Palais de Tokyo, I used Stravinsky's "Petrouchka." That was the orchestra conductor for the exhibition. I would hang the events of the exhibition with the appearance and disappearance of a note. I'd already done this with a fish at the Musée d'Art Moderne. There was a cuttlefish. Every time it appeared, it would set off an event. And it grew from there. What didn't much fascinate me early on were interfaces. First it was a Walkman with auto-reverse, to repeat a soundtrack within a space. Later came professional videos, so I'd use auto-reverse, and it would rewind. I'd love to read a history of interfaces, to get a handle on time. The latest interface of my creation — quite a ways from auto-reverse — is a bacteriological computer that I developed with the people at CERN [European Organization for Nuclear Research]. Their thesis is that there conceivably exists a memory that is not genetic. In three or four weeks, these bacteria learn the rhythm of the exhibition (the lights go out, you start the film, and at the end the lights come back on). I taught that world to the bacteria. They live in a world that is not solar or celestial; it's a temporal world of 25 minutes, the world of the exhibition. They know nothing else. They're bacteria, so we mustn't ask too much of them. They live and will live on forever, as long as you feed them, because a bacterium doesn't die.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So it's the bacteria that control the exhibition?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes. It's they who keep the whole exhibition running: the lights, the sounds, the images. We've disconnected everything. It's they who make the expo work. From time to time, they make a mistake.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Are you saying that you no longer need to be there? That there's no need anymore for a computer to control the exhibition?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — No. They take care of everything. They're there. They control the lights.

OLIVIER ZAHM — They become a living memory.  
PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes. They have control of the whole building. They manage everything. The sound is them, too. They also change the lights.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So the computer is a living organism. The bacterium has replaced the computer program.  
PHILIPPE PARRENO — It goes back to the rather fuzzy idea of "life." We say, "Exhibitions follow a program, have a dramaturgy." That dramaturgy is later forgotten because there aren't really any films of the exhibition. It's not very interesting to watch; you have to go there physically. I don't really have a score, either. I can't play the piece again. Exhibitions are peculiar. They're so contingent on the space. Once it's done, it's done. That said, the rhythmic aspect interests me more and more. The interesting thing with the bacteria is that they're going to return to Paris. They're going to replay the exhibition, for as long as we like.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you feed the bacteria?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — With sugar. They'll be coming back spread on some paper. Then we'll put them back in their container, and they'll take up their rhythm once more. They're in charge of an exhibition that we're supposed to forget but that they'll continue to carry within them.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What I find beautiful about the mechanisms you set up is that they're not merely functional. They also serve an aesthetic end.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — In my opinion, the most optimistic thing you can do is think of the exhibition as a new ritual. This also recalls Jean-Luc Vilmouth or Mallarmé's poem. What does the death of God mean? It means there's nothing left to protect us — so we can entertain other perceptions, other relations to the other. I spend a lot of time just watching people at exhibitions, both mine and those of other artists. I'll also often change the current arrangement. It depends on what I see. I'll improve things once I see what doesn't work. To do an exhibition, you've got to take the time. So the films need to be like marquees; they need to be taken together in a kind of common landscape. It gets me thinking to watch the exhibition and the people who walk through it. I pursue my work, thinking, "This practice is my studio."

OLIVIER ZAHM — Your films, too, are like exhibitions on a screen

— like the film about the last days of Marilyn Monroe, with the camera roving around that room.  
PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes, the hotel where she was living before she died.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is that where she committed suicide?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — No. She killed herself in Los Angeles, but she lived for a few years in that hotel, in a room at the Carlyle in New York. That's where she fell into depression. Our set was a reproduction of the Carlyle.

OLIVIER ZAHM — There, too, your film is like an exhibition, insofar as the objects reconstruct a decor, but they don't tell a specific story. It's not a narrative film. You film the image of Marilyn's death, her ghostly presence.  
PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes, totally. That film is phantasmagoria.

**And then it was also the re-creation of her body through the furniture because that furniture is her. It's also her real voice, re-created with computers, and the camera is like her eye, working off the same algorithm.**

It's a biometric reconstruction of the ghost, who comes back and says nothing. In that sense, it's phantasmagoria. The ghost can do nothing except wander round and round in the space to which you've summoned it. You want to think of her as being alive, whereas in fact she's a machine that can only repeat the same things.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So you have not abandoned your interest in characters and stories because

*Danny the Street* (detail), 2015, and *The Crowd* (still), 2015, exhibition view: Philippe Parreno, "H {N}Y P N{Y} OSIS" at the Park Avenue Armory, New York, photo by Andrea Rossetti, copyright Philippe Parreno, courtesy of Pilar Corrias, Barbara Gladstone, and Esther Schipper





there's always a character in your exhibitions.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes, my exhibitions often hinge on characters, but they're never in a fictional story. In fact, I've never told a story. Annlee [a manga character] tells her literal reality; there's nothing fictional about it in the least. There's nothing fictional about *Zidane* either. *Marilyn* is an attempt to bring a ghost to life, and in the end you see that it's a computer speaking, and that the hand isn't a hand but also a computer.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How did you manage with your illness, with surviving cancer, while continuing to work?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — It's true I was thinking, "What am I going to leave behind?" A voice can be left behind. It happens all the time: people keep and listen to messages from loved ones who have died. The film about Marilyn was truly disturbing for that reason. It brought someone back to life, along with her voice and her handwriting. We'd come up with a machine that could write like her. I programmed that machine to write like me, as well. I told myself that the machine could write when I was no longer around. It could send letters. I also did my voice, so that it could speak like me.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What do you retain from the idea of fiction?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — The aesthetic dimension that we might associate with something on the order of fiction. My characters are mutations, and that produces a kind of aesthetic.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You've had greater and greater success lately.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — No doubt, but the more art I make, the more I realize that making art is complicated — as complicated as quitting smoking. It's exactly the same. It's very, very hard.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What I love about your exhibitions, besides their intelligence and their hidden procedures, is their poetics. It seems to me you've developed that in a powerful way.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — That was the illness. I discovered my subjectivity right when I was supposed to lose it. It didn't pass through the body before. It used to pass through ideas, mostly. It was forced. Later, when you get caught up in the idea of your own death, when you're in a struggle with the world, you become sensitive to everything that touches you. You start to be moved by many, many things. Is it the medication? I don't know. The result is, you become hypersensitive. I started telling myself that the body was a language. I was at something of a

loss with that. I didn't know what to do with it, didn't know how to get through it. I didn't think it was a good place to start because it's the sort of thing that generally leads to clichés.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In the end, though, it comes from you.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes. I accept it, let's say. I tell myself it's not a bad thing to proceed without ideas. You take something else as your basis.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The dreadful experience of being ill and looking death in the face.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Right, exactly.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, as a result, you discovered a poetic potential within yourself?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes. It's odd that it would result from that. I was being pigheaded, though. It was right in front of my nose.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And you continue to read a lot of philosophical and scientific writing?

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Yes, I still do. It helps me structure... I'm curious about the philosophical and scientific worlds. I need to read to understand what art can do with all that stuff. Timothy Morton, for example, talks about something on the order of the "nonhuman." I'm interested in the idea of a different ontology or of different ontologies, like those of Timothy Morton's "hyper-objects."

OLIVIER ZAHM — There aren't many artists who talk about ontology...

PHILIPPE PARRENO — That's why we're called "conceptual" artists. We grapple with the open questions of our time.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And being an artist and making art today have never been dissociated from a state of thought.

PHILIPPE PARRENO — Right. That's why there was no money at all for our generation at the very start of the 1990s. But I write less and less. I wrote a lot at the beginning, but I don't write now. I've started drawing. Maybe I need to structure all these ideas about the relation to the other, about environment, about urban space, about pseudo- or quasi-objects. I've already started.

END



*The Crowd* (still), 2015, and *Bleachers*, 2015, exhibition view: Philippe Parreno, "H (N)Y P N(Y) OSIS" at the Park Avenue Armory, New York, photo by Andrea Rossetti, copyright Philippe Parreno, courtesy of Pilar Corrias, Barbara Gladstone, and Esther Schipper