

Philippe Parreno at ACMI: a new dime and art



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This is the way a conversation with Philippe Parreno, French conceptual artist, seems to go. We start out by talking about the coming ACMI retrospective of the films he has made over the last 20 years as part of his bold, eccentric work as an artist. Some are a minute or so long; one is a feature-length film in which Parreno films the soccer player Zinedine Zidane's face through an entire game. One piece stars Ann-Lee, a manga character Parreno bought for \$400; another uses the voice and written diary of Marilyn Monroe, along with the camera's eye, to bring the actress back to a kind of life.

What he is actually explaining to me, however, is the use of ritual objects in funerals in Mali. These objects, called boli, are made of "organic matter", Parreno explains. Between rites they are kept in closed chambers by the priests and "fed" – with blood, he suggests – so that each time they are brought out, they are different. "So there is some similarity with my understanding of art," he says, "which is not the production of a transcendent object, you know. Nothing is permanent. Certainly art isn't."



None of his art is, anyway; he is always going back to tinker with things. He has to do that, because the possibility of malfunction is built into his constructions; he has spat the word "efficiency" a couple of times before I realise that, at least in the artistic context, he doesn't see it as a good thing. Parreno is mostly known for his gallery installations, one of which I have just seen in the cavernous Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern in London. It has screens that move up and down, digital imagery and a lot of large inflatable fish bouncing around, all under the random control of a bio-reactor. It seems terribly high-tech to me, but he assures me it is just "bricolage": stuff stuck together.

"The bio-reactor sends information to these linked laptops, but sometimes it doesn't work. I like in a way that the mistakes make it extremely human," he says. "The other day it stopped and froze on one image. If that happens we can also freeze the sound. It's quite beautiful to do that: to look at just one image." There is another factor in the tinkering, too: he admits that the artist's final signature on the work doesn't come easily to him. "Even with the films, you know. I think there is something wrong with me, because it's as if I don't want to let them go."



Philippe Parreno explored the written diary of Marilyn Monroe in *Marilyn* (2012).

Of course, he can't really keep coming back and changing all his films, so he has thought of other ways to build in an "extremely human" factor to the ACMI program. There are "about 30 or 40" films, which will be put into some kind of order by presenters deputed to choose the films, turn the lights on and off, pull the curtain and show Parreno's drawings to viewers during breaks.

"So each presenter will be the guy producing the dramaturgy," he says. "He will be this old figure, the projectionist."

Parreno is not immune to this sort of nostalgia, as evidenced by an installation he made in New York representing a street of old-style theatre frontages. "I like crappy films," he admits. He was sick with cancer for some years; bad films were his escape from reality. Experimental film, art films using film like paint, were never his bag; what always interested him about using film as a medium was that it chained images together to make sequences. "It is not so much a form as what it represents as a mechanical device. A device that produces meanings."

He is very wary of narrative, however, even if he often uses science-fiction scenarios or elements recognisable from French New Wave films in his work, invoking familiar ideas of fiction. One curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art described him as a storyteller whose stories were "pure potentiality without resolution". But that isn't necessarily true, because viewers bring their own stories to the mix, even when they are looking at documentary images.



French artist Philippe Parreno contemplates the idea of an exhibition in which nothing is shown. Photo: Getty Images

"After a while your mind starts to drift from the truth to something that has the dimension of soft fiction, you know?" agrees Parreno. "Soft in a way that is comfortable, the same kind of fiction you invent in the back of the car as your parents drive around and you drift, looking out of the windows. Fiction without authority."

A similar kind of drift – a word Parreno definitely does like – informs the assembly of the films themselves. In the same way that his Turbine Hall project joins up some computer programming with some mechanical bits and bobs, the films are "bricolages" of ideas.

"I don't start by saying 'this will be a story about that'; I don't operate like that," he says. "For example, Ann-Lee, this little Japanese character. First of all I found the information that some agency was producing characters for sale. I found it interesting, so I bought one." He then messaged other artists that he had a character without a story, available to anyone who wanted her. "I thought it was interesting that this manga character, who was produced as something temporary, thus became the sign for a collectivity of artists.

"So that is how it started. And then I made a film with this character in it." In the film, Ann-Lee declares herself to be "a product: a product freed from a marketplace I was supposed to fill!". For critics, she became an avatar of art, capitalism and the whole damn thing. "But it didn't start with me saying 'I am going to make a film about the industry'," Parreno says. "It's digressive." One thing simply led to another, just like the shots in a film do."

Other films quite specifically don't lead anywhere, like the ones he describes as portraits. There is the *Invisible Boy*, an illegal immigrant in China; there is a portrait of his mother, a prostitute; there is Zidane. "Zidane was proposing to people to look at a face for an hour and a half. I never looked at my mother's face for an hour and a half, you know. And we don't spend a lot of time looking at art. The average, I believe, is 15 seconds in front of a painting." The artistic experience he offered was thus to look at a portrait for a long time. "And at the same time," he adds, "accept that you can drift."



A number of Philippe Parreno's films, such as *Invisible Boy* (2010) quite specifically don't lead anywhere.

Whatever the mechanics of his work – the laptops, moving walls and revolving stages of his installations or the theatrical flourish of the "projectionist" swapping over VHS tapes at ACMI – Parreno is interested in the idea much more than the thing itself.

"I used to do a lot of collaborations. When you talk about art to an artist and define an object by talking about it, then the object exists because it exists in the mind of the other person as well, like a hologram produced out of the conversation. It doesn't need to be built or seen."

Now he thinks he would like to do an exhibition where he doesn't actually show any work. But what would the show be? How can you have a show that shows nothing? "I don't know," says Parreno. "But it would be interesting. We'll see."

***Philippe Parreno: Thereabouts* is at ACMI, December 6–March 13,**