

Collaborating with everyone from AC/DC to Devendra Banhart, artist Philippe Parreno creates works of heartbreaking genius. Wanna be in his gang?

TEXT BY JESSICA LACK VIDEO STILLS BY PHILIPPE PARRENO PHOTOGRAPHY BY M/M PARIS

philippe parreno

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Philippe Parreno is one of France's hottest artistic commodities. He is one of those rare, generous artists for whom the art world is like a playground, a nurturing place in which he encourages friends and collaborators to work together. Switching from filmmaker to sculptor to writer to producer with singular dexterity, he defies categorisation.

From designing chic cafés in Paris to creating an exhibition of aliens, nothing, it seems, is too cool for Parreno's school and his influences are as wide ranging as David Lynch, ALF and Jacques Chirac. Unlike the brash gags of his British contemporaries the YBAs, Parreno's vision is to boldly go and create futurist fantasies that explore the dichotomy between physical and spiritual forces without becoming whimsically pretentious. He sees collaboration as imperative to the creative process – teaming up with other artists and designers, as he and his sometime collaborator Pierre Huyghe head a new explosion of the French avant-garde. He has an infectious enthusiasm and conversations with him are conducted at double speed as he fast-forwards his way through ideas and thoughts, occasionally skipping tracks altogether. He describes himself as the kid who runs around the apartment, never sitting still to play with his toys. Having completed a degree in mathematics this is arguably why he never did become an engineer, "like the ones who design washing machines while listening to Joy Division at night". This is the bleak parallel life Parreno believes he has avoided. He chose the more precarious artistic vocation and, for a man who readily admits he needs to be destructive to avoid dissatisfaction, art was a kind of salvation from damage and the petit bourgeoisie.

Les grands ensembles is that faceless dead-land of inter urban sprawl from which the French avert their eyes en-route to the airport or the country. That nightmarish terrain of dual carriageways and concrete blocks that fester like ringworm around our cities. These are not the high rises of Le Corbusier, nor the Soviet-style housing projects we now choose to romanticise (where's the solidarity gone comrade?) but functional work-a-day flats for immigrants and the

working classes built with little architectural vision. No one wants to acknowledge these places, no one that is but Parreno. *Credits* is his film homage to the generic post-war tower blocks he grew up in, most of which have now been razed. And what a deeply dark paean it is. The city's shimmering

streetlights burn an amber rim on the night sky, in front of which stands a collection of trees, their black branches ensnared with brightly coloured plastic bags - artificial flowers for a polluted world. In the distance high rises blink like sleepy giants as their lights go on and off. And the

soundtrack: a primal scream from AC/DC's Angus Young. It is Parreno's anthem to lost youth: a giant declaration of alienation that is part sci-fi fantasy part ghoulish nightmare. It has been compared to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. But the colours are too brilliant and the surrounding



No Ghost Just A Shell.



blackness too dirty to sit comfortably with the sepia tinged blandness of Spielberg's alien soap story. Perhaps a better parallel is found in Manga cartoons. That post-apocalyptic world in which good and evil do battle but it is often hard to tell which is which.

It was never Parreno's intention to idealise his childhood, and he freely admits he was as surprised as any at the fairytale results of *Credits*. "I had all these memories of the place, but no photographs, so it was a challenge to make a picture album. And when I re-created the site in my studio in Paris and filmed it, it became this dreamy picture and I imagined myself as a twelve year old kid looking onto this scene and jumping around to AC/DC playing air guitar". Parreno may have grown up in the '80s against a backdrop similar to that portrayed in *La Haine*, Mathieu Kassovitz's nihilistic masterpiece of social alienation. But that is where the comparison ends. It seems that Parreno's release from his upbringing was found in fantasy, and in conversation he often makes reference to science fiction and pop culture, although he admits to not listening to music anymore. But it is his insatiable fascination with shared experience that seems to be the driving force.

Take the computer-animated figure AnnLee who he bought the copyright for alongside Pierre Huyghe. They saved the minor Manga character from certain gory death at the hands of trigger-happy teenagers, so that she would live in the stories devised for her by artists. In a piece entitled *No Ghost Just a Shell*, AnnLee would introduce herself by saying "I am a product, freed from the marketplace. I belong to whoever is able to fill me with imaginary material". Huyghe and Parreno's Travis Bickle-like rescue of this cartoon character is both hilariously macabre and somewhat childish, but it was her final incarnation as a firework (exploded

at an art fair) that provided both a poetic and climactic denouement.

His most commercially successful venture to date, however, must be Anna Sanders Films. The company which has, he claims, become trendy by default was set up in 1997 with artists Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe and Charles de Meaux to serve as an umbrella for their film projects. Huyghe won the Hugo Boss Prize and Gonzalez-Foerster won the Duchamp prize in

2002, while the film *Blissfully Yours* by Thai artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul won the Un Certain Regard Prize at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival and the Dutch Critics Prize at the 2003 Rotterdam International Film Festival. Not bad for a small consortium disenchanted with the stranglehold of Hollywood. But Parreno doesn't see his practice as counter culture – if anything his desire is to be more inclusive. Through his collaborations with Huyghe, with whom he represented France at the Venice Biennale in 1999 and his work with the young design team and friends of i-D, M/M (Paris), Parreno seeks to break down the post-modern obsession with individuality.

So where next for the artist with a manic agenda to rival his fictional character AnnLee? A new show at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York will see the screening of *Boy from Mars*, a film about an artistic community in Thailand set up by his friend Rirkrit Tiravanija. It is another fairytale but this time with a more positive utopian agenda – an homage to the collective ideals



of a community and their desire to provide a sustainable economy using ecological methods. But for all its convictions, Parreno feels it has a slight air of melancholy, and the title suggests a flight from reality, as if the desire to produce a successful collective in today's society can only happen by isolation. No sound accompanies the film and the pre-industrial methods make it appear that the community is, indeed, from another planet. At the end of the film there are no credits, just the disembodied voice of New York singer Devendra Banhart offering his lament. Parreno, it seems, is a born romantic, who has found beauty in the places the rest of us have forgotten to look.

The Boy From Mars will screen at Friedrich Petzel until May 7 www.petzel.com

The Boy From Mars.

