

# The Postman Rings Twice

MARTIN HERBERT AND DANIEL BIRNBAUM ON "IL TEMPO DEL POSTINO"

For a joint commission between the Manchester International Festival and the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist and artist Philippe Parreno orchestrated a series of performances by artists, which premiered last July at the Opera House in Manchester, UK. *Artforum* asked two of its regular contributors to give their impressions of the works presented onstage.



Philippe Parreno, *Postman Time*, 2007. Performance view, Opera House, Manchester, UK, 2007. Photo: Howard Barlow.

## MARTIN HERBERT

FOR "*IL TEMPO DEL POSTINO*" (The Time of the Postman), which took place on three evenings this past July in Manchester, curators Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno offered contemporary artists not previously known for their onstage performances up to fifteen minutes of "exhibition time" before a seated audience. This unusual format set up a basic question: If you are deprived of the liberty you enjoy in a traditional spatialized exhibition—where you can alight hither and yon, and autonomously fast-forward over unproductive ground—what do you get in return?

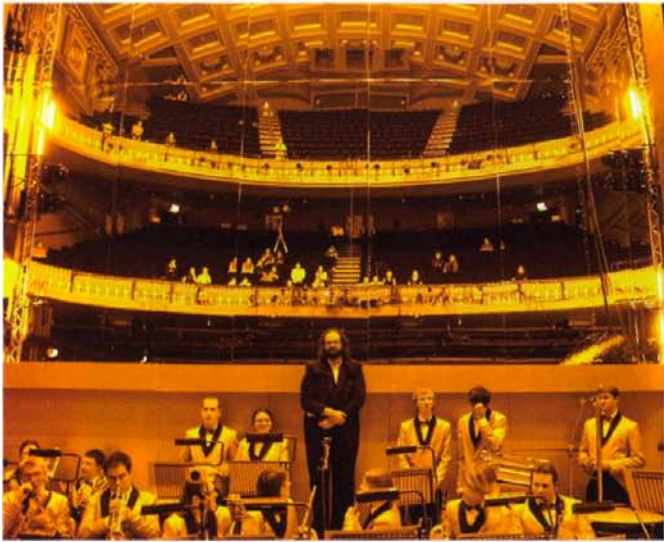
Tino Sehgal's untitled contribution was a near-perfect answer: something spectacular that's too smart to smack of spectacle. Although the third of the works presented, it was a literal curtain-raiser. Red velvet stage drapes were whipped—to a barreling orchestral arrangement of Daft Punk's "Aerodynamic"—through a complex choreography of movements that transformed the otherwise blank backdrop into a huge, balletic, mobile sculpture; there was one showstopping moment when the entire curtain rig dropped, like an exhausted diva, to the stage floor. Crucially, this piece disclosed its excitements and implications swiftly, then exited. Doug Aitken's *Light Bright Now* (all works 2007), which followed, didn't—and illustrated a potential rule for the evening: Make your idea commensurate with its length. In a gallery, I'd depart fast from four auctioneers speedily swapping tongue-twisting bids on nothing, referencing not only a superheated art market but the verbal pyrotechnics of Jamaican reggae; here, the conceit didn't repay the time it sequestered. Particularly given that Aitken's early video *These Restless Minds*, 1998, one of his finest works, similarly featured auctioneers (albeit walking through corporate settings, their language reflecting the stock-market rhythms of technocracy), the failure to compel here suggested that context is indeed everything.

The more adept contributors kept this in mind, while not necessarily kowtowing to the audience. Tacita Dean, for example, nodded to an entire history of avant-garde obduracy with her 16-mm film projection of Merce Cunningham performing a new choreography, *Stillness (In Three Movements)*, to a sound track of John Cage's 4'33". The result: lots of rumbling room tone, and a diminution of activity whereby Cunningham shifted his pose only three times, when his dance

## DANIEL BIRNBAUM

ALTHOUGH BILLED AS an exhibition "not about occupying space but about occupying time," Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno's "*Il Tempo del Postino*" (The Time of the Postman) involved a crucial change of venue from museum to theater. This made for a unique group show of more than a dozen artists who have often exhibited together, and it underscored this generation's interests in collective production and collaboration, ideas reminiscent of the 1960s. The evening thus brought to mind a couple of significant artistic endeavors from that decade. The first was an unrealized project by the visionary British architect Cedric Price, who in 1960 began planning (along with Joan Littlewood, founder of the experimental Theater Workshop in East London) a "Fun Palace" with flexible and interactive facilities for music, dancing, and fireworks. "Choose what you want to do," Price wrote, "or watch someone else doing it. Learn how to handle tools, paint, babies, machinery, or just listen to your favorite tune. Dance, talk or be lifted up to where you can see how other people make things work. Sit out over space with a drink and tune in to what's happening elsewhere in the city. Try starting a riot or beginning a painting—

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From left: Olafur Eliasson, *Echo House*, 2007. Performance view, Opera House, Manchester, UK, 2007. Photo: Joel Fildes. © 2007 Olafur Eliasson, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/COPYDAN. Doug Aitken, *Light Bright Now*, 2007. Performance view, Opera House, Manchester, UK, 2007. Photo: Howard Barlow. Anri Sala, *4 Butterflies*, 2007. Performance view, Opera House, Manchester, UK, 2007.



#### Herbert

company's executive director, Trevor Carlson, indicated that a new movement of Cage's work was beginning. The work was against-the-odds hypnotic and intelligently negotiated (through apparent disavowal) the commandment that implicitly hung over this whole enterprise: Thou shalt not bore.

It turned out to be difficult to disentangle the show's notion of "time-based" art from one that merely seeks a wider audience. Does a theatrical context like this—in which art is "delivered," hence the word *postman* in the title—automatically lead an audience to expect to be passively entertained? The weakest works implicitly answered yes, consequently failing to foreground the depth and complexity that should characterize the art experience. Several works even did so derivatively: Anri Sala's *4 Butterflies*, with its geisha and male tenors

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singing an extract from *Madame Butterfly*, could be credited almost entirely to Puccini; Douglas Gordon's *It's Only Real When It's Dark*—English folk singer June Tabor performing a breathy a cappella version

of "Love Will Tear Us Apart" on the darkened stage—was indebted first to Joy Division and second to David Lynch, whose estranged and anxiety-laced nightclubs often seemed the model for the evening's ambience of warped commerciality.

Then again—as Lynch's own work implies—maybe it *is* possible to simultaneously tap the receptors for art and entertainment. Pierre Huyghe's three short inclusions, slapstick vignettes collectively entitled *Hello Zombie*, suggested so. They starred two costumed figures—one large, yellowish, glowing of eye, and looking like a furry cross between a squid and Sasquatch; the other smaller, cuddlier, and bearlike. In the best of their three brief interactions, they sat on a bench,

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or just lie back and stare at the sky." The second project emerged a few years later, as Öyvind Fahlström, a restless artistic soul who was experimenting at the time with most disciplines and trying to invent new ones, came up with a similar idea. Insisting that new architectural concepts for music, dance, and art were necessary in his day, Fahlström argued for "pleasure houses for meditation, dance, fun, games and sexual relations"—as well as a new kind of art, he said, that fused pleasure and insight. "Reach this by impurity, or multiplicity of levels," he urged, "rather than by reduction."

Multiplicity of levels were certainly on offer in "*Il Tempo del Postino*," a collective attempt to finally make the Fun Palace materialize. Here was first-rate adult entertainment for childish grown-ups such as myself: monsters, magic, romance, sex. Price himself was discussed in Parreno's act, *Postman Time* (all works 2007), which was second on the bill. A man stood onstage, holding a huge magnifying glass before his face, and speculated on Price's idea of time as an element in design . . . without moving his lips: a ventriloquist without a dummy. Fahlström's highest ideal in art was "artificiality," but of course, in a work of art, nothing is for real; separating voice from body, Parreno foregrounded the act of illusion.

Many of the contributors adapted elements of their visual art for the stage: Doug Aitken's *Light Bright Now* continued the artist's fascination with the verbal pyrotechnics of American auctioneers. Here four of them performed live, producing a strange, intense music that reached more and more ecstatic levels. In *Echo House*, Olafur Eliasson created one of his typically interactive situations: A large reflective surface on the curtain turned the stage into a mirror, as the orchestra mimicked the audience's sounds. The musicians successfully lured viewers into an increasingly lively exchange—some people certainly love to hear themselves go wild. A highlight was Carsten Höller's "scientific experiment," which made use of