

USA



PHILIPPE PARRENO

Park Avenue Armory, New York

'What's the difference between a sign and melancholia?', asked the girl actors in Philippe Parreno's 'H {N}Y P N(Y) OSIS'. These children, whose stuttering and gliding movements are meant to suggest automata, are embodiments of the manga character Ann Lee, whose rights were purchased in 1999 by Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, offering her to other artists to 'interpret'. This version, *Ann Lee* (2011), was made by Tino Sehgal. Can anybody even attempt to answer this question, I wondered, and is it asked in good faith?

Over the past few years, Parreno has become a virtuoso choreographer of audiences, leading them on journeys around spaces such as the Palais de Tokyo's arduous metallic basement spaces in Paris, or London's Serpentine Gallery's circus of rooms, using seductive cues that combine sound, light and kinetic apparatus. In the vast, spectrally lit Drill Hall of the Park Avenue Armory, he chose to place this choreographic skill centre-stage. A 'street' of 26 marquee lights titled *Danny the Street* (2015) pleasingly twinkled, bleeped and electronically spasmed at various moments throughout the two-hour cycle of the show, occasionally playing electronic compositions, or otherwise creating the impression of nascent electric beings attempting communication, flickering into sentient life. A revolving fragment of stadium seating, *Bleachers* (2015), inspired by the scenography of theatre director Jacques Polieri, automatically rotated to point audiences at films projected on three different screens, which themselves rose and fell in sequence. Three mechanized pianos played baleful

compositions in ghostly fashion, though they were played once, and beautifully so, by pianist Mikhail Rudy, who on my visit performed a rendition of Maurice Ravel's *La valse* (1919–20) – a composition which was listed on the work's materials – and an hysterically key-bashing, doom-laden version of Prokofiev's *Dance of the Knights* (1935), which wasn't.

'H {N}Y P N(Y) OSIS' was a deconstructed form of the classic movie experience: seats, lobby, soundtrack, film, lighting, cinema marquees and audience, all cut loose from the traditional viewing experience, and presumably the film and video works here were selected for their American references (the show's title inserts 'NY' into 'HYPNOSIS'). The rhythmic movement along railroad tracks in *June 8, 1968* (2009), which re-creates and animates Paul Fusco's photographs of a waiting public mourning Robert Kennedy's body as it passed by them on a train (staging that is at once sentimental and affecting) invites an inevitable sense of history in

motion as well as a reel of film passing through a camera. This funerary atmosphere is neatly picked up at the finale of *Marilyn* (2012), a *mise en scène* portrait of Monroe's hotel suite at the Waldorf Astoria animated by weather, unanswered phone calls and an automatic writing machine, in which the camera slowly pulls back on tracks to reveal that the room is a set in a large film studio. Yet they, and most of the works here, never quite surpass their status as artful conceits. *The Crowd* (2015), featuring images of a public in the same Drill Hall, acting confused, hypnotized and seemingly enraptured by a pulsating black and red blob which appears on screen intermittently, is tedious, and the final revelatory moment in which the film ends and windows in the dim space mechanically open to reveal that 'we, too, are the same crowd' seemed banal. As the only significant new piece, it was indicative of an empty centre to this show. In contrast to Parreno's stronger works here – *Invisibleboy* (2010), suggesting the imaginative life of an illegal immigrant boy in New York's Chinatown, and another Ann Lee work, *Anywhere Out of the World* (2000) – it didn't seem to have anything to say.

Nor really, in accumulation, did this grand spectacle as a whole. It was a feat of programming, engineering, moving parts and atmospherics. Back to little Ann Lee: 'What is the difference between a sign and melancholia?' A sign is something that points elsewhere, whereas melancholia is the black bile of depression. It made no sense to ask what the difference is, and yet they were, somehow, the axes of Parreno's exhibition. What was most gloomy here, in spite of the twinkling lights, was that this was a great flashing sign that pointed primarily to the magnificence of its own apparatus, which was able to deftly hold our attention.

LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS

1
Mikhail Rudy performing
as part of Philippe Parreno's
'H {N}Y P N(Y) OSIS',
2015

2
Jon Rafman
*You are Standing in an
Open Field (Waterfall)*, 2015,
inkjet print mounted on
Dibond, resin, polystyrene,
1.3 x 1.5 m

3
Jon Rafman
Mainsqueeze, 2014,
video still