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When Creepy Kids Are Part of an Art Show

HYPNOSIS, Philippe Parreno's latest large-scale exhibition, is as mystifying as it is memorable.

Her body is limp. Her eyes are void. A tiny girl—about 9-years-old—is surrounded by a group of people who stared silently as she tried to understand what was happening around her.

Slowly, her head spins almost 180-degrees. Her vacant eyes lock on mine and send chills down my spine. The lights illuminating the massive drill hall of the Park Avenue Armory go dark.

I am experiencing the mystifying and hypnotic performance of Philippe Parreno's "Ann Lee," one of over two dozen works on display and interacting with visitors as part of Parreno's latest large-scale exhibition, *HYPNOSIS*. (It's pronounced "hypnosis.")

The girls wander through the crowds and speak in sync, asking questions like, "Would you rather be too busy or not busy enough?" and "What does a sign and melancholia have in common?" while describing their experience as a four-dimensional object.



Philippe Parreno

“There’s a kind of pleasure in it,” co-curator Tom Eccles, who has worked with the artist for a number of years, told *The Daily Beast*. “But there’s also this unnerving feeling that something has gone awry ... it’s quite an unusual experience.”

Assembled in the Armory’s Wade Thompson Drill Hall’s cavernous 55,000 square foot space, the exhibition is every bit as exciting as it is confusing. Live performance, light, film, sculpture and music create a spectacle that could only be the brainchild of 55-year-old Parreno.

French born Parreno is not well-known to American audiences. He was born to a generation of artists known for their “relational aesthetics”—art that involves human interaction, which is sometimes hard to grasp. But once you do you’re usually never disappointed.

In 2002, his solo exhibition *Alien Seasons* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris turned the exhibition space into a ghostly world. Images and lights fade in and out in almost utter silence. Interaction with the exhibition activates a film on the cuttlefish, which changes its skin color to hypnotize its prey.

A 2010 exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery forced viewers to navigate the space, room by room, by following a soundtrack. And in 2013, he turned the Palais de Tokyo into a “quasi-living, perpetually evolving organism” through sound, image and performance

As with many of his works, nothing is immediately apparent in *H {N}Y P N{Y} OSIS*. And that seems to be Parreno’s biggest intention—forcing the viewer to spend more time with the work than breezing through it in one fell swoop.

“You have to slow down and be willing to take time with the piece,” Eccles said, revealing that the average time spent in front of a painting is around 3.2 seconds. “Then, the piece will begin to reveal itself. The different works will become a sequence. That sequence may ultimately be random, but you realize that you sort of have to give something to it and spend time with it.”

In doing so, your mind—and senses—begin to play tricks on your perception. Forcing yourself to immediately know what is happening will only drive you further down the rabbit hole.

As I entered the Park Avenue Armory’s cavernous space, a narrow strip of vacant Vegas-style marquees (“a ‘Blade Runner’ version of Times Square,” drill hall, illuminating almost every inch.

Bulbs of various shapes and sizes are configured to hang in clusters from the ceiling, form walls of light, or appear sporadically on the makeshift runway as they appear to change intensity with no rhyme or reason.

As you walk down the aisle the two rows create, a piano begins to play a random string of notes. Stepping closer causes a shift in sound as the tunes begin to play from another piano in the distance. Three massive film screens surround a set of bleachers at the end of the pathway.

Noise from outside the drill hall, which spans an entire New York block, seems to be the biggest trigger for what can only be described as a spectacle.

Microphones placed around the parameters of the Park Avenue Armory activate the outside interaction with the interior. Sirens, car horns, and people talking on the sidewalk create Parreno’s seemingly random precession of events.

Throughout the symphony of piano ballads and chaotic street sounds, three separate films alternately play on massive screens that surround a rotating set of bleachers.

“June 8, 1968 (2009)” centers on Paul Fusco’s photographs taken while on the train that transported Robert F. Kennedy’s coffin from New York to Washington, D.C., in which groups of American’s stood track-side to pay their tributes.

“Marilyn (2012)” puts the viewer in the Waldorf Astoria suite where Marilyn Monroe once lived. Her voice, recreated by a computer, lushly names objects in the room. Another shot shows her writing letters in perfect cursive.

“The Crowd (2015)” is set in the same space where the viewer is sitting. Hundreds of people fill the drill hall and stand hypnotized watching the same screen. The viewer’s sense of reality is goes off-balance as the line between reality and fiction becomes extremely blurred.

Each of the films is visually stunning and shot by Academy Award-nominated cinematographer Darius Khondji (*Seven*, *Midnight in Paris*, *The Beach*). The films’ massive screens over take the viewer to add even more impact to the breathtaking imagery.

the next event will take place, but that’s what makes the spectacle of *H {N}YP N{Y} OSIS* so great. It’s easy to get lost—and you want to. Parreno’s attempt at forcing the viewer to slow down and interact is successful, and beautifully so.