

# Philippe Parreno: 'To apply art to political resistance is always a bit complicated'

Marilyn Monroe resurrected, hypnotised waltzers and a projectionist changing the show on a whim: the French artist's exhibition at Acmi is cinema subverted



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A film still from *The Boy From Mars* (2003) by French multidisciplinary artist Philippe Parreno. Photograph: Philippe Parreno

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Philippe Parreno's interest is in blurring the recognisable boundaries that distinguish fiction from documentary, film from other forms of artistic expression, and real time from the cinematic illusion of how time passes.

In the retrospective of the French multidisciplinary artist's films, *Thenabouts*, showing now at the Australian Centre for Moving Image in [Melbourne](#), the structure of the experience itself illustrates his exploration of deliberate uncertainties. *Thenabouts* offers Parreno's 30 short films in Acmi's vast underground chamber like a visual art installation, the screen rising from a carpet that has no fixed seating but floating balloons shaped like fish. Lights go on and off, surround sound swallows the moments of darkness, and the projectionist and their equipment are lit in a glass box, fixed and visible in the centre of the room.



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It's a nod to the theatrical values brought to the presentation; in another destabilisation of expected boundaries, the projectionist is the protagonist of *Thenabouts*' action - empowered to choose, repeat, deselect, reorder or quit the films according to their mood or taste.

The stage curtains serve a theatrical function as they play with or against the films, and more still comes from the exhibition attendants, who appear in shadows behind the screen, or talk through microphones, or approach members of the audience to chat about the films, the work, the artist. In my case, a woman appeared from the shadows to show me a portfolio of Parreno's preliminary sketches, composed by hand from ink and wax, for a short piece of animation.

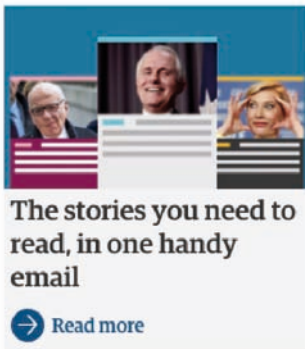
It's perhaps because the rituals of cinema viewing are thwarted and rewritten that the challenges posed by the films themselves receive appropriate amplification. After watching Parreno resurrect Marilyn Monroe (in an empty hotel room where machines replicate her handwriting and recordings describe the furniture of her last days), a boy wandering with demons through the streets of New York's Chinatown, and a large-eyed storyteller in a crown repeating a circular fairytale into a decaying VHS tape, it's a short called *The Crowd* that provokes in me both fear and realisation.



A still from Philippe Parreno's 2015 film *The Crowd*. Photograph: © Philippe Parreno. Courtesy Pilar Corrias, Barbara Gladstone, Esther Schipper



For *The Crowd*, Parreno had volunteers hypnotised to move by following cues from lighting effects and recorded music. In the film of the event, the dead-eyed participants waltz and circulate in and out of shadows to tunes that emanate from a piano that no one is playing.



I realise this is the perfect metaphor for the Trump political moment, and it is terrifying.

I mention this to Parreno when we meet, and it becomes clear the political is certainly on his mind. He's just learned of [Matteo Renzi's resignation in Italy](#), and is concerned by the "the fascists in the north, parading at the win". As an artist with a background informed by Situationist ideas of event, spectacle and connectivity, Thenabouts has given him opportunity to reflect on his antecedents, his practice and the context of now.

Of his early work, he describes going out "with kids, going out to demonstrations, explaining what it could mean to be together under the same slogan and demanding the same attention". For him, however, the artistic idea that "we could all be a part of the same image" on the screen became less interesting; he started working with directors of photography and using the camera to explore details of individual drama.



Philippe Parreno thwarts and rewrites the rituals of cinema. Photograph: Charlie Kinross



Although his work has had the prestige of selection for the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, his most famous piece is no doubt his feature film [Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait](#), which focused solely on French soccer star Zinedine Zidane as he plays a game of football.

Film is, of course, no less political for a refusal to engage in explicit political terms. For Parreno, the Zidane film was a provocation for audiences to: "Look in the face of an Arabic eye. Apart from the fact I'm in love with him, I wanted people to look him in the face for an hour and see a man from Algeria who is not white, but who everyone worships."

He explains: "I think the problem of art is form, and [form] is a complicated thing to do. Form is not an object, it is a moment of attention - to apply art to political resistance is always a bit complicated, but there are ways to do it."

I confess that it's the suggestive, metaphoric nature of *The Crowd* that has perturbed me. He suggests it's because his subjects are a canvas of projected fears.

"You don't know to what they're exposed but they're exposed to something," he says. "Fear you produce with your own anxiety - they are suspended within potentialities, but as a viewer you feel that potential with your own anxiety. They are facing your own demons."

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It's an explanation, perhaps, of Trump's following, the Le Pen-type nationalism that seeks to "turn Europe into a cultural theme park", the Brexit vision of a homogenous Britain that Parreno finds "not interesting".

It's a challenging time for art as well as politics, we both admit. "But it's good to be at war again, perhaps?" says Parreno, as I'm leaving, with a smile.

● [Philippe Parreno: Thenabouts](#) is showing at Acmi until 13 March