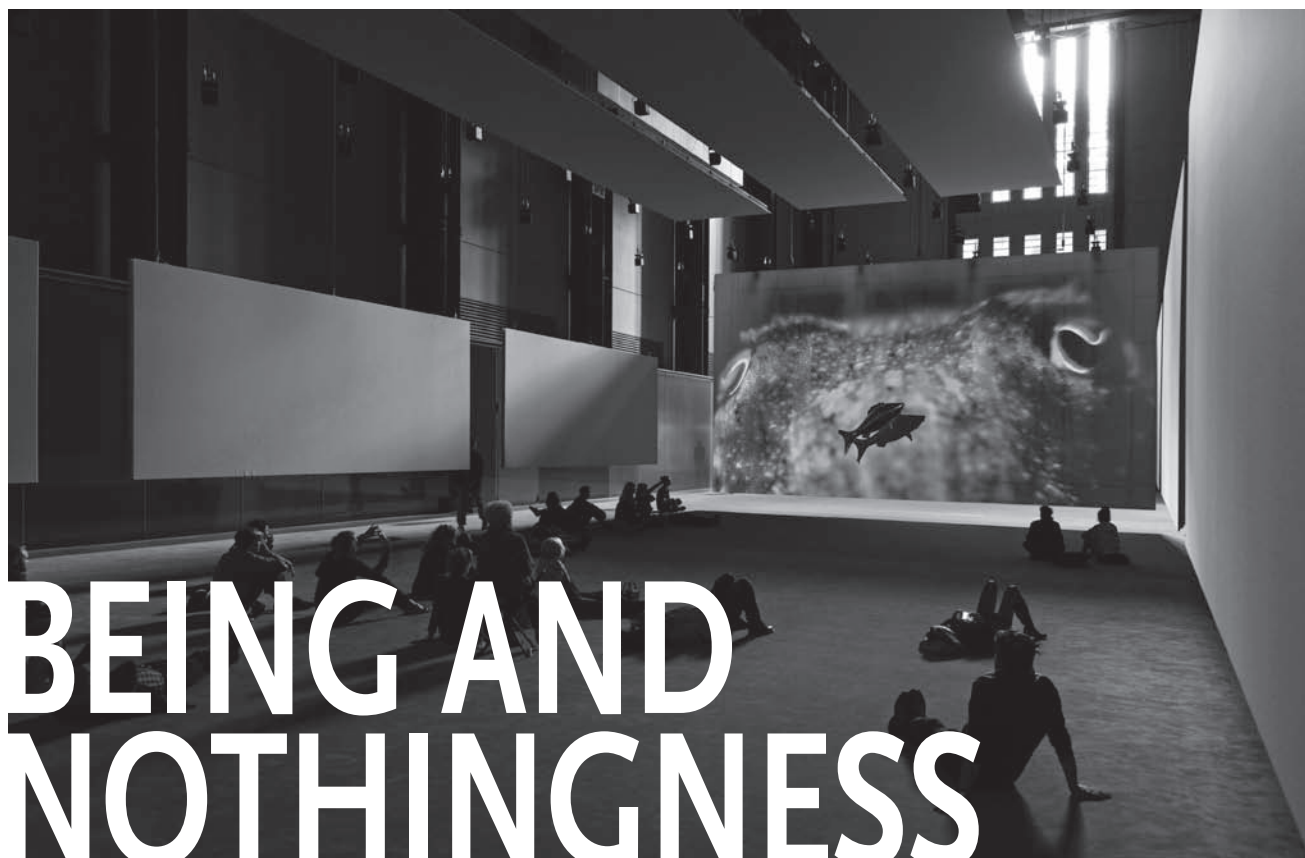


PHILIPPE PARENNO INTERVIEWED BY OLGA SMITH

The French artist, one of a group who emerged in the late 1990s associated with the curator Nicholas Bourriaud, talks about his commission for the Turbine Hall, about directing the audience's gaze and about turning an exhibition into a sentient being.

Anywhen 2016 installation view at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall



BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

Olga Smith: *You conceive of your exhibitions as a coherent whole and not a collection of objects. The Tate Turbine Hall commission Anywhen follows this principle.*

Philippe Parreno: There are even fewer objects here. Actually, just one, and some moving stuff. I am reducing everything to the minimum. This morning I was reading this text, I don't know why it came to me, this text by Roland Barthes, published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1970s, on 'le sens obtus'.

Le troisième sens?

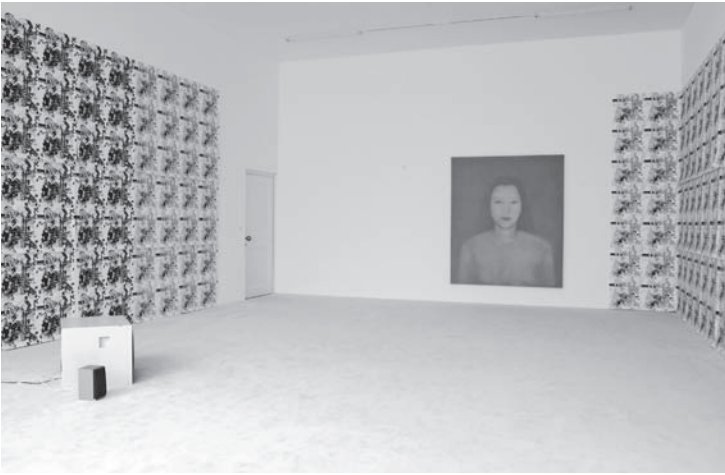
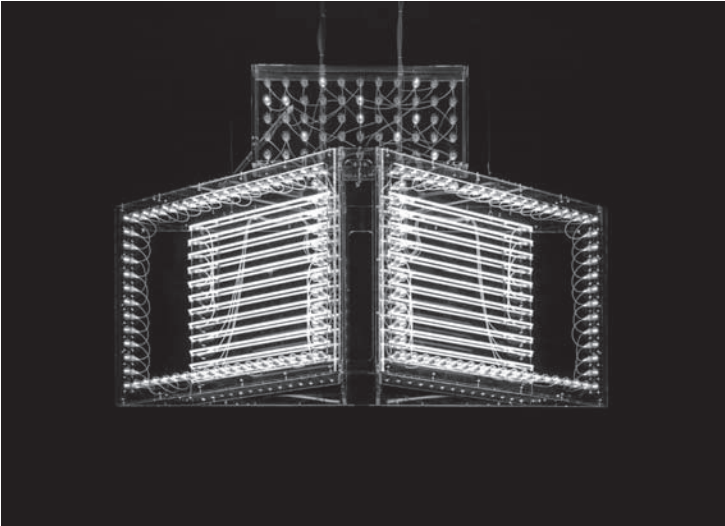
Yes. It's about the idea of the 'third meaning', in relation to 'le foulard', the headscarf of the woman in the still from *Battleship Potemkin* by Sergei Eisenstein. Barthes writes about meaning on the back of meaning, and outside of culture. Not negating culture but outside of culture – it is that thing that moves you, that attracts you. This idea came back to me when I was thinking about *Anywhen*. It does not really lead to a narrative, it does not add up to a picture, but people remember it.

All the time I get asked the same question, what is the theme of your work, what does it represent? I reply that I am

a conceptual artist, I don't think in these terms. I am interested in the phenomenology of the form, what it is, how it is produced. In exploring these questions at some point you want to create some tension, so you direct the gaze, engage the public. Then you release the tension, and the form is gone and you are back in the architecture. You create a moment of collectivity in an empty space and in this process you shape the space into something else – like a sculpture.

Before you embarked on this project, you met with the architects Herzog & de Meuron. What did you discuss?

I wanted to know more about the origins of the Turbine Hall, about the space that I was supposed to occupy. And in fact, from the very beginning the Turbine Hall was intended as this big empty space, a free public space, according to an idea of Nick Serota's. It is an idea that seems to have come from the Beaubourg in Paris, which has this space called the forum, a sort of covered public square. I am familiar with this kind of space also from the time that I spent at Magasin in Grenoble, when I worked there as an art handler while I was a student. The large space at its centre is called the street and is very similar to that of the Turbine Hall. When Tate was converted,



'Anywhere, Anywhere Out of the World'
installation view at Palais de Tokyo, Paris

Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe
No Ghost Just a Shell 1999-2002
installation view at Kunsthalle Zurich

the Turbine Hall was enlarged by digging out one level down to make it even higher. The idea of flying things in *Anywhere*, to emphasise the height, comes from the conversation I had with Herzog & de Meuron, which was very useful to me. What is it, this great hall, is it just a large cold space or can it be something else? In order to achieve that something else you turn it into art. And that is what I tried to do.

Your project, while unique in the way that it engages the technical and architectural facilities of the Turbine Hall, is nevertheless comparable with another memorable commission for that space, Olafur Eliasson's The Weather Project from 2003. You also created a situation for visitors to occupy by inviting them to spend time in the space.

Yes, exactly. Yesterday I spent some time looking at the people looking at the work. I stayed after the museum closed and worked late – I did not have much chance to play with the exhibition before. So I added a few more things and hopefully tonight I can do a little more. The fact that the exhibition will stay open for six months also enables the work to change over that time. Also, twice a week the opening hours are extended from six until ten, and this gives me an opportunity to do something. I have to think what, but maybe it could be lectures of some kind, but without sending out official invitations. It would be nice to open a space within the existing structure, which can also be a programme. So it is like a programme that programmes.

Is it possible that this mode of spontaneous programming has to do with working on a very large scale? The Turbine Hall is a vast space, and previously you had 22,000sqm at your disposal at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. On this scale, you don't actually know what the exhibition looks like until you install everything, so there is a degree of uncertainty concerning the outcome.

Well, I have some tools – they are really bad – that I borrowed from the gaming industry, a program called Unity that is used to make 3D virtual models. I can walk through the exhibition, so to speak, and I can visualise sound, light, whatever. But still, it remains a mental construction, you don't get the real event. It is also hard to write it down because there are so many layers. So very quickly it becomes a big mess. But now that I am here in the exhibition, I can see things a little better. It's like when you know your instruments, you don't have to think about what you are doing. It becomes a combination of space, light, sound, perspective – and also colours. I can now see that we can project colours. It is funny, I get asked what do you think about the exhibition and I say, I am only starting to work now. Before, I had to build machines, but now that they are here, I actually have time to work.

And how do art institutions deal with uncertainty regarding the outcomes?

Well, now it is better, because I have these 3D models. They know it works – *ça travaille*, as they say in psychoanalysis. What it will be in the end is not really a question, but it is true that at this stage the project is only half finished. And maybe it will never be completed.

One of my favourite exhibitions was your retrospective at the Pompidou Centre in 2009. You structured the exhibition around the projection of the film so that the space switched every ten minutes between the black box of the cinema and the white

cube of the gallery. In effect, you produced two exhibitions in one space, but the viewer had to spend time in the gallery to see both. So time became the time of looking.

Years ago I wrote a text, *Postman Time*, this was back in 1994. *Postman Time* was made for Kunstraum in Vienna as part of the group exhibition 'Lost Paradise'. I had one actor playing the postman deliver leaflets to apartments around the exhibition venue. It was a weird project, and the text that I wrote explained the relationship we have with time when we talk about art: the fact that we presuppose that art is always at our disposal. This is a problem that Marcel Duchamp pointed out a long time ago in his discussion of 'retinal art': we do not know how long to look at a work in the museum. You spend, like, ten seconds with it, but it's not clear that this is what you should do. Duchamp said about his readymades: it is important to know that they exist, but you do not need to see them.

Film as a medium is often present in your exhibitions. In addition, you use the cinematic protocol of the film screening as the organisational structure for your exhibitions, as for example at the Pompidou retrospective. What is the significance of film for you?

Film for me was a means of pointing out that art is a stochastic event. In the beginning I worked with video, so I could rewind the videotape, stop it, start again. I switched on the relay and in the darkness the light would come on, like a flickering presence. It is not very different from what I am doing here at Tate, except that previously I used to work on a cycle, a looped programme, and now the cycle is gone. And I have been waiting for that for a while. I did not want to use an algorithm or a mathematical formula, but life-forms. At Tate there are situations where we play and things react – triggered by the bioreactor – so the whole thing becomes this weird biomechanical machine. The exhibition becomes a sentient being. It has no body, but it has organs.

Film, for me, has always been part of the texts about cinema. This included the text by Barthes on Eisenstein I was talking about, but also the texts by Eisenstein, Serge Daney and Jacques Rivette, and the texts of philosophers, such as Henri Bergson, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. But I was also interested in cinema because it wasn't a pure art form, it was about bad comedies as well as experimental art film. And I was interested in experimental films not because they were films but because they had good ideas.

Did you learn to use the camera when you were a student at the École des Beaux-Arts de Grenoble?

Yes, I made a film there, *Flowers*, in 1987, for which I filmed flowers in a changing focus. That was quite an experimental film – it looked like cool video art, even though at the time it was not called video art. I then sent it to different TV channels and they broadcast it, with their logo and everything, as the background during a weather report programme. In this context the work changed its meaning, which I thought was interesting. But really, the only film I did was *Zidane. A 21st Century Portrait*, made in partnership with Douglas Gordon in 2005. My main interest is in the relation of cinema to fiction. And when I say fiction I do not mean narrative, I mean the trust you place in an image to show you what is really happening. And that was the idea behind the 'Annlee' project *No Ghost Just a Shell* from 1999, this relationship we can have with an illusion.

Your work, for me, very cleverly engages the sense of anticipation. In your exhibitions viewers often wait for things to happen.

In one of the first films I did, *Siberia* from 1988, I animated a

page from a magazine. This was a work about attention, about attracting attention, but in a non-authoritarian way. The phrase that was used a lot in the 1980s was 'floating attention'. It was used in psychoanalysis, but there was also Jean-François Lyotard's concept of 'floating space'. And there is this concept in Jacques Lacan that I have been recently discussing, holophrasis. It is described as a frozen moment, where the distinction between meaning and the object of the meaning disappears and they become one and the same. The symptom becomes the illness, and the illness becomes the symptom. I am not thinking obsessively about that all the time, but this is one of the concepts that is still interesting to me.

Speaking of Lyotard, the exhibition that he organised with Thierry Chaput at the Pompidou in 1995, 'Les Immatériaux', has been very important for you. Have there been other exhibitions that have influenced your work?

I saw that exhibition. The last show that John Cage did before he died, that was also great. There must be others, but I cannot recall just now.

We don't talk any more about 'relational aesthetics'. But in the 1990s your work, and that of Pierre Huyghe and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster among others, was closely associated with this term. Especially your work, as you were in every show that Nicolas Bourriaud curated in that period.

Well, of course, Nicolas was a friend and still is, even though we don't see each other very much now. But back then we even lived together in New York for a year, so of course we were close. But 'relational aesthetics' became a term after the event, no one used this term at the time. I think this happens a lot with art-historical movements. 'Postproduction', a term that came later, was more interesting for me, while 'relational aesthetics' I never really liked. We had discussions about such ideas as the feedback loop and so on. A better term for 'relational aesthetics' would have been 'conversational aesthetics', as it was all conversation-based.

In the past, many of your projects were in collaboration with other artists. Projects were often executed in the conditions of what Douglas Gordon described as 'collaborational promiscuity'. Does this explain certain similarities in methods, motifs and thematics, especially between you and Huyghe and Gonzalez-Foerster?

Well, we spent a lot of time together. Dominique I have known since I was 17, we were in the same art school. And Pierre and I spent a lot of time together when we worked on *Anna Sanders, l'Histoire d'un sentiment*, 1996-97. We lived together in a castle, all alone – it was like *The Shining*. Working all the time on this weird magazine, having no sex, it was kind of strange. Now I do not see Pierre very much, but I love what he is doing. For sure we have similarities, but I think I now see better the difference between us. It is the same with Liam Gillick. I now see what it is that makes us understand each other, but I can also see that we have different practices. Its like one is a schizophrenic and the other is a paranoiac.

You seem to genuinely like to work with people.

I like the conversation. For me this is a way to shape form. At a time when I was doing a lot of conversation-based work I got to a point where I realised that if the definition of the real is that it still exists when I close my eyes, then maybe it is enough to just think about something together. It exists like a hologram. And if we combine the points of view on one event, then it may exist in reality. This is what is happening in the Turbine Hall right now.



film still from *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* 2005 by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno

Bernard Joisten, Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno

Siberia 1988 exterior view at Magasin, Grenoble

In the past, you have used a computer program for the staging of the exhibitions, you have used biometry and automata. Now you have a bioreactor installed at the back of the Turbine Hall. It all looks 'technically' incredibly sophisticated.

Yes and no. It is also a bit of a *bricolage*. The guys who are operating the bioreactor – Jean-Baptiste Boulé and Nicolas Desprat – are of course serious scientists. The levers that allow things to fly up and down, this has been done in the theatre for hundreds of years. The computer programs are run on computers like yours here. And I like it that it is a bit burlesque or slapstick: sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but I don't care any more, it is more human-like this way. When something does not work, that is also interesting. For example, yesterday the light should have been off when the film is screened – I kind of liked it. Sometimes the bioreactor makes a decision I don't like. So it becomes unclear if things are functioning or not.

All those different elements in the Tate commission – sound, light, moving elements, film – when they come together, it is a multisensory experience. Are you interested in the synaesthetic conflation of senses, as described in Charles Baudelaire's poem Correspondances?

Yeah, there is a bit of that, maybe. Synchronicity is a cool idea. We were talking about cinema – in the film *Anywhen* a ventriloquist speaks but in a voice-over, which is completely absurd because by definition the voice-over is added later. But that is because your eyes and your mind are trying to find meaning, impose meaning.

Are there limits to what you can do with exhibition as a form? Can you envisage a time when you move beyond the form of the exhibition?

No, I don't think so. So long as there is art there are exhibitions. I may change the way I work again. I am now at the end of a cycle and I am thinking about programming differently. I am also interested in group shows again. I did a lot of those as an artist, but also as an artist-curator. I really liked doing the exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, when I was invited by Carlos Basualdo to work on the exhibition 'Dancing around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp', 2012-13. The problem I have with art is not art, it is the object and the artist, in Barthes's sense of the 'author'. For me it is still important to question these notions, and perhaps I can do it through group shows.

I am looking forward to these exhibitions.

Me too! ■

Philippe Parreno's *Anywhen* is at Tate Modern, London until 2 April.

OLGA SMITH is an art historian based in Berlin.