





Flying Solo

After years of collaboration, **Philippe Parreno** takes off on his own.

*BY DANIEL KUNITZ
PHOTOGRAPH BY TODD EBERLE*

“Y

ou’re interested in stories,”
I say to Philippe Parreno.

“In time, no?” he corrects.

I argue that when you have a beginning and an end, you have the structure of a narrative. He doesn’t disagree. But on this May morning he is preoccupied with how time can be applied to space. We’re riding a train from New York City to the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where Parreno is working on an exhibition that will open in a few weeks. A thin man with a shaved head, he is sitting with one leg bent, his foot on the seat, explaining how he will “script” the

gallery space. He has already divided it into two long rooms, each with red carpeting and a huge wall at the far end that will function as a movie screen. The exhibition will consist, in part, of two films—*Anywhere Out of the World*, 2000, and *June 8, 1968*, 2009—showing sequentially. When one ends, explains Parreno, “the projector projects a white light on the screen so the space gets lit up” while another flickers on in the adjacent room. “It’s like fireflies,” he says.

Parreno thinks of both films as portraits. *June 8, 1968*, which gorgeously depicts the journey of Robert F. Kennedy’s funeral train, is a “portrait of a dead senator.” *Anywhere Out of the World*, about a manga character named Annlee—the rights to which Parreno and artist Pierre Huyghe, his friend and partner in the project, purchased from a Japanese company—“is a portrait of a dead product.” Of course, neither is static, like a painted portrait; each unspools over time, as a story. Both are mournful, a mood that seems appropriate to a retrospective. In *June*

Still from *June 8, 1968*, 2009.
Sixty-five-mm film, recorded sound on seven tracks plus 4K video master. Edition of four.

8, 1968, the camera lingers, in the manner of Paul Fusco’s photo book *RFK*, on the faces of those who have come to watch the assassinated candidate’s coffin pass, while in *Anywhere Out of the World*, Annlee (who announces, helpfully, that “you can spell it any way you want”) dolefully complains: “I was cheap, designed to join any story. . . . I am no ghost, just a shell.”

The artist’s own story, as recounted during our train journey, is not at all dark. At the time of our conversation, however, it was approaching a crossroads. The Bard show was the last in a series of retrospectives: at the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis; the Irish Museum of Modern Art, in Dublin; and the Centre Pompidou, in Paris. In November he’ll inaugurate another series with an exhibition at London’s Serpentine Gallery. What’s notable about this new series is that, despite having shown consistently since leaving art school, in 1989, Parreno feels he is only now embarking on a solo career. Until recently, almost all his work involved collaborations.

Collaborating is central to relational aesthetics, the term French critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined in the mid 1990s to define the practices of artists like Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Huyghe, Carsten Höller, and



Douglas Gordon. All of them, Bourriaud notes, “deal with the interhuman sphere—relationships between people, communities, individuals, groups, social networks”—rather than “independent and private symbolic space.” The best-known of Parreno’s collaborative efforts is the extraordinary 2006 feature-length film *Zidane, a 21st-Century Portrait*, made with Gordon, in which 17 synchronized cameras follow the great French soccer player Zinedine Zidane over the course of one game, from the kickoff to the final whistle. It is replete with Parreno-esque paradoxes: An exceptionally intimate portrait that was nevertheless shot in front of tens of thousands of spectators, it has, as Parreno has described it, a “time line but no scenario,” operating “between fiction and documentary,” and occupying a place “between a photograph and a painting, between a readymade and a sculpture.” It depicts an entire soccer match but rarely shows the ball; its subject is a star, a kind of soloist, who nevertheless is part of a team—a collaboration.

Another paradox: Although highly conceptual in his approach to making art, Parreno seems to seed his works with autobiography—sometimes directly, at other times allegorically.



Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno. Still from *Zidane, a 21st-Century Portrait*, 2006. Feature film, 90 minutes. Below: Installation view of *June 8, 1968*, in “Philippe Parreno,” Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

“Growing up in Grenoble in the ’70s really should have prevented me from becoming an artist. The coolest thing was to make movies,” a boy says in voice-over in *Stories Are Propaganda*, a short film Parreno made in 2005 with Tiravanija. Like the boy in the film, Parreno grew up in Grenoble in the ’70s, the son of working-class parents, his mother a house cleaner, his father a factory worker. Like Zidane, he is a Frenchman of

Algerian descent, born in Oran, in 1964. With his polymathic intelligence, Parreno might be compared to the American writer David Foster Wallace, whom he admires and whose essays he was reading at the time of our train journey. The Frenchman, though, has a talent for sociability—hence the collaborations—that Wallace lacked. Parreno began his higher education studying math (specifically topology) and



FROM TOP: © PHILIPPE PARRENO; CHRIS KENDALL; OPPOSITE: © PHILIPPE PARRENO



thought he would go on to optics, which he imagined, in a characteristically intellectual twist, would be a good route to becoming a cinematographer. But he failed to make friends in the field, finding the other mathematicians “weird,” and so went to art school, first in Grenoble and then for a final year in Paris, where he now lives. To earn money during his studies, he worked as a ski instructor, and since *Zidane*—when he found himself going soft from hours sitting in editing rooms—he’s been avid about fitness, and now runs or boxes several times a week. Incidentally, Parreno, who is deeply engaged with music and has collaborated with the composer Pierre Boulez, never listens to music while working out. He likes pushing past the boredom of, say, running on a treadmill without such distraction. “It’s a way to forget,” he says, “to stop my brain.”

If the past few years have found Parreno focusing on his own, independent work, they have also seen the fruit of perhaps his most important collaboration: the birth of his son,

Still from the film *The Invisible Boy*, 2010.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Still from the film *The Invisible Boy*, 2010. *Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year It’s an Artwork and in December It’s Christmas*, 2008. Cast aluminum, paint, music score, 107 x 80¼ in.

now two years old. (Parreno is separated from the boy’s mother, making them, he says, “a normal couple.”) It is difficult not to draw a connection between this event and the artist’s current project, his first noncollaborative feature-length film, *The Invisible Boy*, which will follow an illegal Chinese immigrant child in Manhattan. Parreno sees it as a sort of bookend to *Zidane*, concerned with an individual

overlooked and unseen and thus almost the complete opposite of the exceptionally famous, “supervisible” soccer player.

Parreno began shooting last year, when he came to New York to meet the boy. “Basically, I’m telling the story of somebody with no identity, and I’m providing an identity for the character by telling his story,” he says. The artist means this literally as well as figuratively, since to hire the boy he had to procure working papers for him. “It’s a story about paranoia, the way the boy sees things,” Parreno continues. Some of the things he sees in the film are animations, providing a fictional counterpoint to the vérité touch of employing actual immigrants, rather than actors, in all the roles. The feature-length

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version has yet to be shot. At the Serpentine, Parreno will screen a short version.

In addition to providing the first glimpse of the new film, the Serpentine exhibition is significant for being Parreno's first solo outing in a London institution, a fact that organizer Hans-Ulrich Obrist finds incredible, given that "he's one of the of the most important artists of his generation." The show will combine films and objects: possibly some of Parreno's Warholian Mylar balloons in the shape of comic-book thought bubbles and certainly some of his Christmas trees, grouped under the title *Fraught Times: For Eleven Months of the Year It's an Artwork and in December It's Christmas*. For Parreno the exhibition itself is a medium and the resulting show an artwork. "He's going to use the whole Serpentine, inside and outside, and really think about it in a holistic way," says Obrist. "There's going to be sound, a very elaborate sound track that will leak from the inside to the outside. Parreno works on the moving image, in sculpture, with installation,

and with the invention of the display—it's a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, using all the senses."

"The exhibition galleries are at the same level as people walking outside, which creates a kind of cinematographic feeling—seeing the people walking in the park with their dogs,"



notes Serpentine's director, Julia Peyton-Jones, who adds that not only will the sound filter out but the trees will too: "And that view from the inside of the Serpentine outside to the park will create a really extraordinary dynamic, not least because those Christmas trees are so magical and it's a perfect time of year for them."

Hearing his plans, one has to wonder how alone Parreno actually will be going forward. Maria Lind, organizer of his Bard show, says the artist "is an obsessive collaborator, so even if he says he wants to reduce that, and maybe even stop it, I see him having a hard time really following that decision." Parreno, who refers to Obrist and other curators as "coproducers," obviously views his exhibitions as collaborative affairs. And there is a certain irony in his having embarked on a solo career in film, a medium that is intensely cooperative. Perhaps Parreno's next phase will be less about soloing and more about discovering new forms of collaboration. **MP**