

MOUSSE



Philippe Parreno, *June 8, 1968, 2009*.
Courtesy of the artist; Air de Paris, Paris;
and Pilar Corrias, London

Mousse Magazine #37
February - March 2013



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For Philippe Parreno and Anri Sala the object is always a thing in transit: one phase of a detailed itinerary taken by an idea amidst multiple forms, and in parallel one phase of the itinerary the visitor takes in the context of exhibitions conceived as choreographed routes. Films, at this point, have taken on great importance for both artists, and the work on the acoustic environment of exhibitions is based, to a great extent, on their shared taste for the dialectic of image and sound in cinema. For the upcoming Venice Biennale, Anri Sala is preparing a work involving sounds, visuals and space. Cyril Béghin asked the two artists to discuss these themes.

A MATTER



A

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J. Philippe Parreno, *The Boy From Mars*, 2003. Courtesy: the artist; Air de Paris, Paris; Esther Schipper, Berlin

K. Anri Sala, *Intervista*, 1998. Courtesy: Ideal audience international, Paris; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Johnen Galerie, Berlin



B

OF SYNCHRONIZATION



C

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PHILIPPE PARRENO AND ANRI SALA,
MODERATED BY CYRIL BÉGHIN

D



ANRI SALA

Someone sent me a phrase from Lacan we might use to start our conversation: "The hysteric is a slave in search of a master over which to rule."

CYRIL BÉGHIN

This might be a good way of getting ready for the latest film by Paul Thomas Anderson, The Master.

PHILIPPE PARRENO

I saw it in September, it's great. But I don't know if it really corresponds to this quotation from Lacan... I really like Anderson's films, especially *Punch Drunk Love*, which is a kind of fable, with an amazing soundtrack. Anri, do you remember that scene in which a pianoforte is left on a sidewalk?

AS No. But I do remember a film with Tim Roth, which tells of a boy born and raised on a ship. There is a nice scene in which he plays the piano during a storm, with great energy, and they both slide into the saloon [*The Legend of the Pianist on the Ocean*, Giuseppe Tornatore, 1998]

PP You invented that, there's no such film.

AS If there's no such film then I'll shoot the scene myself, right away!

CB *There is a significant difference between your recollections: Anri evokes a scene in which we see someone playing the piano, while Philippe speaks of a scene in which there is just the instrument. Music has a large part to play in your working process, especially in your films. But with Anri we always end up seeing the musician/s, while with you, Philippe, we seem to never see them.*

AS It's true, apart from the opening credits of *Intervista* [1998], I have never used music that is not produced in the action of the film itself. The music is always the result of the screenplay. I am not talking about "film music" in the conventional sense of the term, though there are some ambiguities: when do we realize that what we are hearing comes from the scene itself? In *Long Sorrow* [2005] a saxophonist is hung up high, on a window sill, but it takes a while to realize that someone is playing hanging in the void. I am not interested in having the music insert an image in a context, I want the image to produce the music.

PP The first time I used music was for the film *Credits* [1999], a sort of re-composition of the view of a "priority urban development zone" where I grew up. I asked different people to remember those places, to make the re-composition starting precisely with their memories. And I had asked Angus Young, the guitarist of AC/DC, to play while imagining he was me, as a teenager, who imagined being him, looking at this landscape from a window. A sort of backwards air guitar. So the music was part of a "procedure", in the sense assigned to the term by Raymond Roussel.

AS You had already produced the image and you showed it to him?

PP Yes, it was an already established subject. I did the same thing with Devendra Banhart for *The Boy from Mars* [2003], which is a building that has generated a film, or a film that has generated a building: an animal with two heads, one in reality, the other in fiction. The idea was to continue the game: the film, in turn, generated the music. I showed it to Banhart, and I edited in his improvisation after the images, on black.

AS You never already have music, which you use to do the editing.

PP At least once, for *Invisible Boy*, the Godspeed piece already existed.

CB *But you also wanted to continue Invisible Boy by writing an opera, which would have permitted you to continue the making of the film.*

PP Yes. I wanted to make an orchestra "speak", to produce words with musical instruments.

AS There is always an ambiguity between sound and music. In *Le Clash* [2010] it is hard to believe that the small music box is spreading its sound into the abandoned building. For *Now I See* [2004] I asked a group from Iceland, Trabant, to give me a song that still didn't exist. At the time, Trabant was famous in Iceland, but they also had another group, The Funerals, that wasn't so well known. The members of the group used to switch roles, between Trabant and The Funerals: the bass player became the drummer, etc. I wanted to make a film where each of them would have yet a different role. In *Now I See*, we see them playing, and the vibrations make a balloon in the form of a dog attached to a speaker fly away. At this point the musical piece begins. Instead of staying on the musicians, the camera tracks the balloon, which stays in the air thanks to the low frequencies, and the musicians become secondary. It is a sort of voyage in which the music produced during the film is held hostage by its own low frequencies, which in turn are joined by another melody, transforming the whole into "film music" that accompanies the flight of the balloon.

CB *Anri is always looking for a moment of synchrony between soundtrack and image, while you, Philippe, seem to favor gaps and duplication.*

PP With music, yes, but with sound the relationship is different. For *Zidane* [2006] we began to edit the sound prior to the image. For *C.H.Z.* [2011] we put microphones in the ground in the garden before starting to shoot. But above all we should not forget that the films are designed for their display contexts, where they appear and disappear. The problem is always the same, between sound and image: what comes first? It is a question of automation: who is the master, who the slave? Often it is the sound that, technically, "guides" the image. Because it is simpler to position a time code on a soundtrack than to make a long image to which a sound or an event is attached.

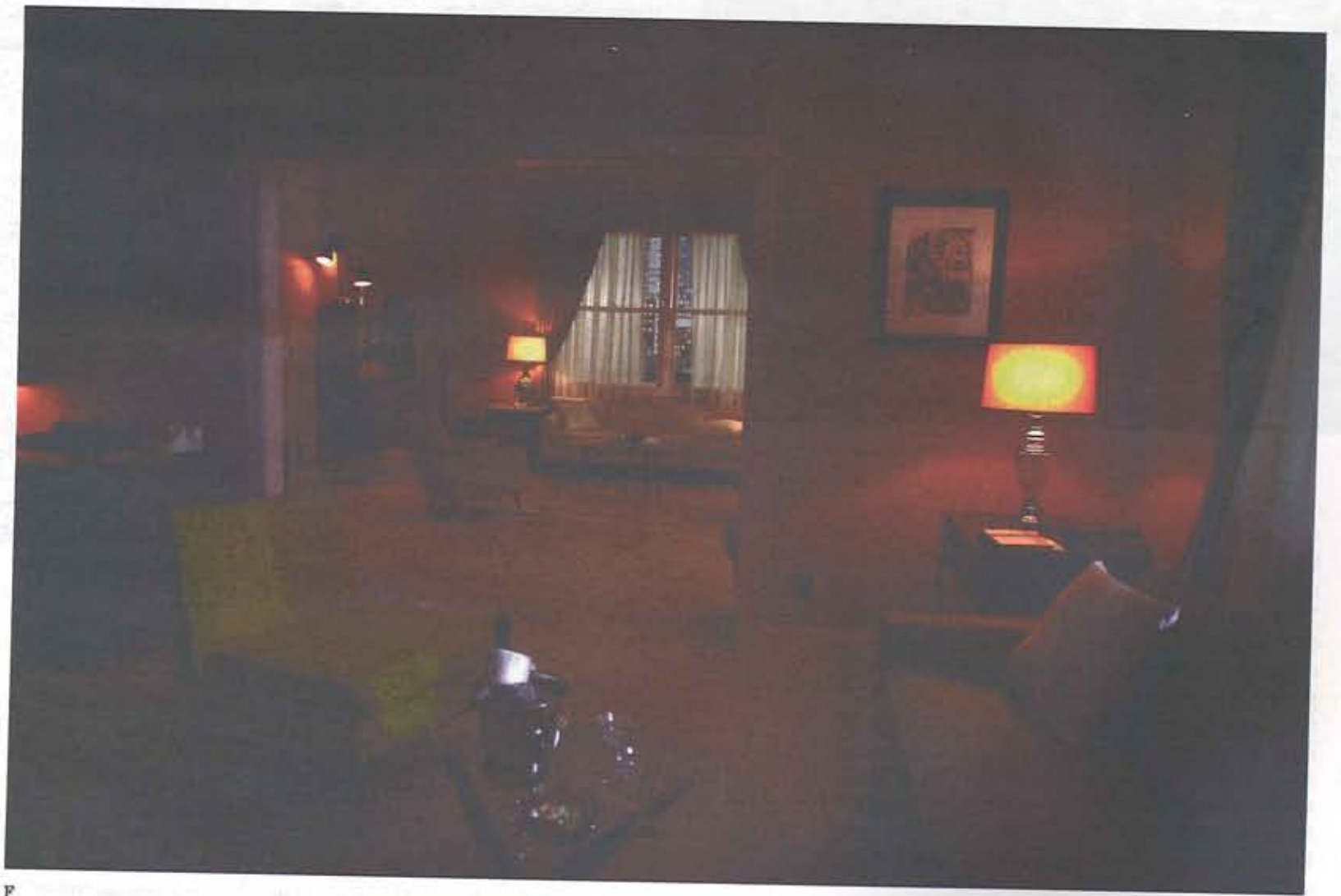
AS Also because sound can be moved gradually in the exhibition space, unlike images, which leap from one space to another. Or we can easily create or re-create a sound in space, but not the image. Precisely as you did at the Beyeler Foundation with the underwater speakers, that played the sounds of the films, or like I did with the drum kits that played on their own at Centre Pompidou. Sound remains a material that can be shaped



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in space, something that doesn't happen for the image, if not in the form of collage or multiple projections, which do not interest me, a priori.

PP Making a film, as we do it, means somehow signing a contract with ourselves, saying that every time the object appears, it is necessary to renegotiate its appearance, or even its status as an object. In fact, it takes on different forms, generating as many different interpretations, while in the time capsule of the movie theater nothing changes, except the mood of the spectators. My first film showed a bouquet of flowers, an image of very little meaning, which I had given to several television stations *Fleurs*, 1988. At one, it had become an advertisement for Interflora: the fact that it was broadcast produced the meaning. This is something fundamental: most of the objects we produce are never really concluded. And sound takes part in this elasticity, this uncompleted aspect that can be taken on by film. I am reminded of the sculptures of Mali, the so-called *boli*. These are ritual, vaguely zoomorphic objects. Between one ritual and the next the *boli* are covered with earth, blood or excrement, so well that each time they appear they are never the same. They are

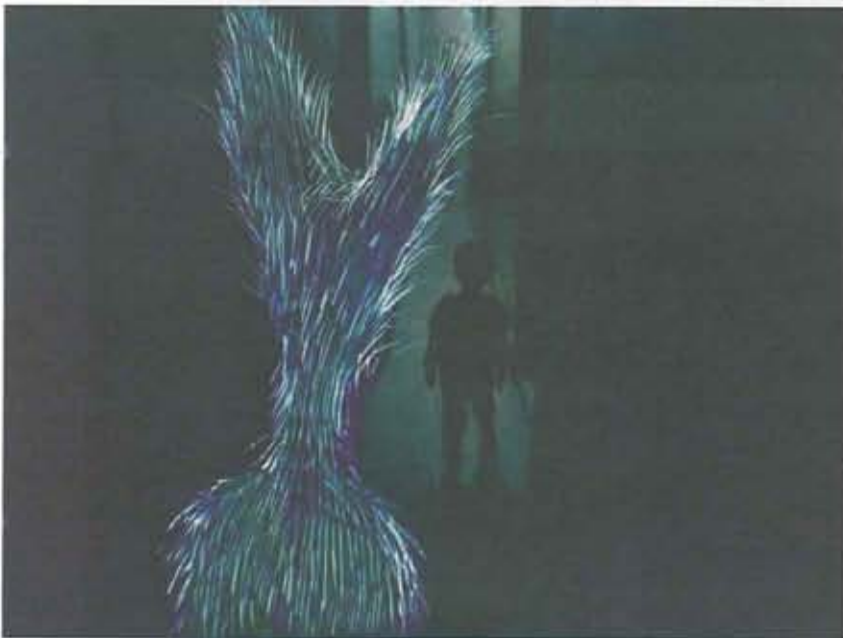
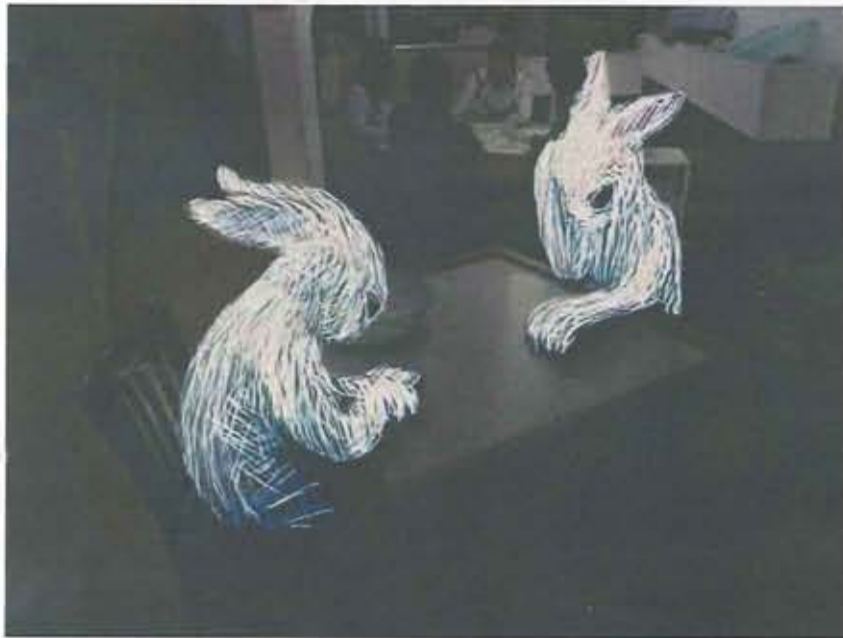


F

said to be alive. And it is precisely the ritual of display that transforms the object.

AS It often happens, when I am working on a film project, that I already know where it will be shown. It is a piece of information I already have, and it influences the production. The device is included in the production thinking. It is something that is part of the trip: the film is not finished in the moment of mastering, but when it reaches a screening surface.

PP Now that the technical tools allow it, there are films I remaster to change a hue or a sound. *The Boy From Mars* for example, where I completely altered the soundtrack. Just like the *boli*: so why not propose to museums that have purchased these works, some time ago, to give them new objects? We should do this for everything: you could also go back to a



G

drawing, so it would be in constant movement.

AS At times this means putting further layers onto an object, which come from outside, through reflections and transparencies, as you did at Centre Pompidou with the curtains that opened and closed.

PP There are some things that belong to this category, but it took some time for the thing to become evident. Not so long ago, with Anri, we complained about the fact that every time a work is re-presented or reproduced, for us it was like a form of constriction. To re-present or re-do the same thing is not very interesting. We are not craftsmen, we don't reproduce forms: we re-create them.

AS And let's not forget that the art world is essentially visual. Negotiating sound technique is very hard. The culture of hearing requires a sensibility that is rarely that of the world in which we operate.

PP But in the moment in which we manage to get our hands on the "master", it all gets easier, and more amusing as well.

CB *This is how you have learned to think about objects, and films in particular, with this elasticity, the possibility of their changing in the area of the display context.*

AS The film has a perimeter, which can be enlarged depending on the different spaces in which we project it. It is a temporal sculpture. We began by saying that in my films the music comes from the action itself; while in

the case of Philippe it comes after, through in any case it was composed for the action. It is a different way of relating to synchrony. But let's not forget that we are working on a double separation of sound and image: those of the film, and those of the exhibition. In Philippe's exhibition at the Serpentine or in my show at Centre Pompidou, you have *one* sound and *many* images. While you travel with the sound, you encounter images. In this dynamic, I am increasingly interested in "destabilizing" the films, to create other relationships between them. To produce a reality in the abyss between two screens, when the sound is present and the image is out of the frame. An image has just finished, and another begins, farther away: the viewer is held in an intermediate space, where it is the image that is off-screen, rather than the sound, as usually happens.

CB *I'd like to insist on the idea of synchrony, though: while in Anri there are these effects of an image out of its role, perhaps it is to better underline the moments in which the image and the sound are joined, moments that ensure a sort of reality effect. While for Philippe the reality effect never happens in this point.*

PP I'll go back to Roussel's procedure. The form is not important: it is the procedure that takes us back to the form. For me, the construction of the image is simply one element of the automaton. So the question of synchrony can arise in different moments: during shooting, editing or screening. You talk about synchronization in the classic way, thinking of cinema. But we have to pay attention to the word "film". For me, the film is but one moment of the form. The camera is used to capture, in that given moment, a form in a space, but it is just one of many moments. In *C.H.Z.*, I begin to place the microphones in the ground, then I construct a garden; the thing starts to come alive, and it is already an element of the display. Then I film it. The terrain continues to grow. And then the film is done, a sound has been given back. It is a chain of elements in which you can never say what comes first: the synchrony isn't there, where you think it is. For me, nothing could have been more synchronous than Angus Young playing in front of the re-composed images of *Credits*. It was a moment of display, but not the one I then chose to exhibit.

AS It's like the autofocus of the camera. The camera makes things clear adjusting the focus where the light encounters an object, not necessarily where there is a meaning. The same thing happens in the exhibiting: will the meaning of synchrony take place in the film or elsewhere? You choose the best moment in the space, which will become the master. And to play this game, in every phase there have to be potential synchronies.

CB *Is this why you, Anri, film musicians; immediately triggering a very strong possibility of synchrony in the film itself?*

PP For me, the sound does not make image in the recording of the image. And the shooting is not the moment in which the film is made. As Anri said, the cursor of synchrony can be continuously moved.

AS Where is the difference between making the sound come first to help you to produce an image—in my case—and making it come first to "prepare" the moment in which it will encounter the image? As far as I'm concerned, it is always sound that leads me to the starting image. For *Long Sorrow*, I got the idea of the saxophonist, Jemeel Moondoc, hanging in the void. So I needed a window, i.e. a view. But the starting point was neither the window nor the view. My problem was: how can I have someone who produces sound through breathing, suspended in the air, capable of negotiating with this void only by virtue of being a human instrument?

PP And then, you find the window.

AS Yeah, and the problems increase. Because if I have a window, then I also have a view, a possible metaphor, a symbolic environment. What I have to cross is the process: the sound demands a given image, but how can I keep that from becoming a trap? I have to constantly reduce the image that springs of the sonic reality. While you think about sound and image in a more simultaneous way.

PP Perhaps... for *Marilyn* [2012], I had to invent two robots: the vocal robot that produces the voice, and the mechanical robot that writes. The image was literally subordinate to the sound, given the fact that the voice describes the things that are filmed. This is rarely the case, because I usually prefer one thing to be triggered by another, like a series of links in a chain. The film *C.H.Z.* leaves a terrain behind it that gets covered with vegetation, and with trash. The two things go together, the "object" and the "subject". The nature of the object becomes an "other" nature: it has produced something that is alive. To get back to the idea of elasticity, it is as if the object rested attached to something it has produced and, at the same time, has not completely emerged from its shell. It is projected into the future, but it is still a little bit in the past. This is the thing that interests me most: to produce diffractions of the object that will develop, to become its pollution, its project, its screenplay, without ever ceasing



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to change. And this has to be constantly negotiated, all the way to the presentation or re-presentation of the object.

CB *What do you mean by "negotiation"?*

PP First of all, negotiating with a figure. This is why I was talking about the procedures of Roussel. What Anri tells us in his thinking about *Long Sorrow* seems at first to be a mad hypothesis: "hanging a saxophonist in the air". This hypothesis takes form in the paroxysm of the display. The question of the chain of meanings is often raised, and probably the thing has no solution. At times one has to wait for the publication of the catalogue for the conclusion. You must never stop, it is the revolution of the pleasure of play, as they said in the Seventies. The permanent revolution: if you stop, you die.

AS In this chain you are describing, made of objects, exhibitions and books, there are often slippages. Sometimes you have to make decisions about the space before the film is finished. I find it interesting: of course it can create problems, but also interesting hypotheses. These are procedures that do not exist in cinema.

CB *It is like a non-stop discussion with many people involved. For example, I was struck by the way Philippe speaks openly of his projects, always using discussion as an open moment of reflection.*

PP In cinema there is more of a culture of secrecy. Also in art, but it is something new. What we have done, just as many others have done before us, is to open the practice of the atelier. The production emerges and flows everywhere. It is precisely the painter's nightmare: you construct an atelier that is different each time, modified, exchanged, taken into the exhibition space. Forms are created in these negotiations. But nobody does it,



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because there is the risk of things getting diluted. For the exhibition at Centre Pompidou I spent months making the film *1968* [2009]; at the end of each screening, the curtains of the room opened automatically, something that was organized in 5 minutes. Often, though, people remembered the curtains opening more than the film. But it is a bit like dining: you need a bit of bad taste to appreciate the good flavors. The exhibition has to have ups and downs, it is still thought of too much like a treasure chest. These are questions that date back to the avant-gardes. The influence of sound on the production of an image is already there in the synesthetic paintings of Malevich. When Duchamp does a painting under a chandelier, his palette is influenced by the color of the light. These are games. Someone should start to write a history like this. There are more books that talk about the history of objects than about procedures, that sort of slippage of the terrain. The protocols of apparition of forms in space that we define as display are rooted in a particular moment, contemporary to the birth of cinema. In his *Dictionary of Received Ideas* Flaubert defined exhibition as the "cause of delirious excitement of the 19th century". With our way of proceeding, Anri, me, and others, we undoubtedly lose immanence, solidity, but we gain something like joy.

AS To get back to our earlier terminology, it is like losing certain achievements of synchronization to rediscover other synchronies with the viewer.

CB *This is exactly what was created by the opening of the curtains at Centre Pompidou: you simultaneously transmitted, inside the room, a sound taken from outside, in a literal form of synchrony.*

PP Precisely. But that was a last-minute gesture, found during the installation of the exhibition. And this is the dangerous moment. The sentence is not complete, it is painful. You are still writing your theater piece one hour before the audience enters.

AS The economy of live performance makes this type of operation possible, but we don't make theater. In general, we do not work with a technique that has been produced for our purposes.

PP They are found objects!

AS Or, more than anything, found techniques.

PP There is something terrible about not having your own technique. You have to always base what you're doing on those of others. Generally the thing works, but you have to spend a lot of time convincing people.

AS And the equipment has not been designed for the uses we make of it. Often I use only one part of its potential, and I may use more than one device, combining them. The machine or the show control that can combine all the different qualities still doesn't exist. It is like renting a castle and using only the vestibule. And it is a serious economic problem.

PP Now, for Palais de Tokyo, I'm thinking about turning things upside-down: to display only the procedures of installation of the objects, eliminating the presence of the objects themselves.

AS In other words, you remove the destination to produce the itinerary.

CB *Recently you worked at the Philadelphia Museum for an exhibition on Marcel Duchamp.*

PP It took them a while to find a definition for my work: "set design" or "choreography", then in the end they borrowed the term from French, *mise-en-scène*. For the first time, I did a show without my work: there were all kinds of devices, but without my objects. It is a sort of mental, non-authoritarian choreography, with a direction of interpretation, but not clear, apparently without text. The eye is attracted by a light, a sound, by forms that move. There are many sounds, sometimes excerpts from sonatas for prepared piano by Cage, or maybe a chorus that sings a score by Duchamp. I made a piece with some interpreters of Cunningham: with microphones attached to the floor, in the theater I recorded the steps of the dancers. In the museum space, on the other hand, we installed a platform with speakers in place of the microphones. When the dancers are not there, we can still hear them moving. At times they are really there, and dance the same steps, shifted or out of synch, in a very unpredictable way.

I think it would have been awful to see poor videos in black and white of Cunningham's choreographies. We needed to invent forms to understand how, at a certain point, he asked his dancers to move from one position to another in a random way, without any relationship to the music. This fact becomes the object of an experience: we hear dance steps, a musical excerpt, and the thing works. You understand without having read any text. It is the exhibition that produces knowledge.

CB *Another case of desynchronization?*

PP Yes, but Anri could have done it too, a bit like there were exchanges between Cage and Cunningham. At a certain point there is this simultaneous presence of strong personalities that have something in common. The time has come to realize this. If a sense of community is no longer possible in art, the world is truly in a bad way. Getting involved in the practice of exhibition also means making a commitment to others, to the fact that the other may have similar ideas. No form of copyright exists to protect practice, but this is always renegotiated in its terms and its authority.

CB *The difficulty might be that by crossing so many different practices, each of you embodies, in himself, a form in common?*

PP The true danger is that the common can get transformed into academia. Anri does his exhibition for the Venice Biennale, I will be at Palais de Tokyo, Douglas Gordon will soon be at the Museum of Modern Art. The procedure has been accepted, now it is up to us to play, to question ourselves. Because we are only at the beginning, there is still so much to invent.



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