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## Peripheral Visions

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BY ROBERT BARRY IN FEATURES | 07 SEP 13

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In 2010, the octogenarian kinetic artist Julio Le Parc found himself in Venice, wandering about the different levels of the Palazzo Grassi. 'Keep your ticket,' said the Argentinian-born artist to his companion. 'Why?' asked his friend. 'You'll see,' Le Parc replied. Then he proposed a deal to the gallery attendant: if he and his friend did not like the exhibition they should be given a full refund; if they liked only half the works on show, they would ask for just half their entrance fee back. After all, reasoned Le Parc, 'this collector is a millionaire. Such an amount of money is nothing to him. And, as an intelligent man, he will no doubt want to know what the public thinks of his taste and his arrangement of the show.' Upon arriving back at the ground floor of the Palazzo, however, they could no longer find the attendant. 'This collector has no need of the public,' Le Parc concluded. 'We pay and we leave and that is all.'<sup>1</sup>

Le Parc himself could scarcely be accused of having such a cavalier attitude towards his audience. Ever since the earliest exhibitions of the collective he convened in the early 1960s, the Groupe de recherche d'art visuel (GRAV), he has been in the habit of providing brief questionnaires for the public, soliciting their opinions and preferences. His large solo show earlier this year at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris – the first survey of the artist's career in France, which began with his arrival in Paris from Argentina in the late 1950s – was no exception. At the exit of the *salle de jeux* (Games Room), which displayed Le Parc's interactive 'game' works such as *Faites tomber les mythes* (Knock Down the Myths, 1969), *Choisissez vos ennemis* (Choose Your Enemies, 1970) and *Frappez les gradés* (Strike the Officers, 1971), Le Parc left a stack of A4 sheets pertaining to the latter piece, asking us to indicate which of the various authority figures the artist had illustrated on punching bags we would strike first: the policeman, the priest, the MP? Or, perhaps, the artist?



'Series 12' and 'Series 15', 1970-71, installation view at Palais de Tokyo, 2013. All images courtesy: Atelier Le Parc; photograph: André Morin

Sitting with Le Parc three days before the show's opening, amidst all the noise and bustle of a major exhibition under construction, the artist described to me what he perceives as a significant shift in power in the art world between the conception of this work and the present. The power of the critic, he says, 'has diminished. Back then, nobody knew the names of curators and museum directors, but little by little they grew in importance,' and the balance swung increasingly in favour of star curators and collectors. In recent times, however, Le Parc has noted a further change. The public, who he says were once no more than

'spectators', now exert 'a much greater influence' over the exhibitions they see. This role for the audience – less passive, more active – was anticipated

in no small degree by Le Parc himself, in works he made nearly half a century ago.

Born in 1928, in Mendoza, Argentina, at the foot of the Andes, Le Parc settled in Buenos Aires in his teens and studied at the Instituto Universitario Nacional del Arte. Today, the iuna boasts an extensive department of kinetic art, but back in the 1940s, he tells me, the teaching was 'extremely classical' and he painted only figuratively. There, Le Parc was taught sculpture by Lucio Fontana, but even the great Italian artist and theorist was tied to the strict programme of the academy. Nevertheless, Le Parc and some of his cohorts benefited from extensive discussions with Fontana at precisely the time when the latter was composing his famous 'Manifiesto Blanco' (White Manifesto, 1946) – a text that all the students signed, except Le Parc. 'It was a principle for me,' he tells me, 'because the ideas were Fontana's, not mine.' Where 'Manifiesto Blanco' talked of energy, Le Parc was more concerned with matter and its transformation. 'But these were ideas for the future,' he continues, 'for even Fontana himself was a figurative sculptor at that time.'

In 1958, Le Parc left for Paris, keen to see what he regarded as 'the international centre of art'. He began to develop a highly formal, systematic abstraction of the flat painted surface (and, a little later, also sculptures), influenced by Piet Mondrian and Victor Vasarely, and using only black and white – at the very moment that European cinema was turning to colour. Despite his abiding interest in images that move, already apparent in such early works as *Rotation de carrés* (Rotation of Squares, 1959), Le Parc stresses less the relation of his work to cinema than to information theory, the pursuit of a logical series of permutations, like a code, first in black and white, then, as his work evolved, adding grey, and, finally, a strictly limited palette. Movement for Le Parc was a function of what he calls a 'peripheral vision' – a sort of dazzle camouflage for the corner of the eye, decentring the focal gaze of Renaissance perspective through an uncanny optics of misperception. In works from his 'Contorsions' series from the late 1960s, including *Cercle en contorsion sur trame* (Contorting Circle on Striped Background, 1966), the use of simple motorized movements in combination with flexible, mirrored materials, set against a background of parallel lines in black and white, produces highly complex, disorientating patterns like watching the *Predator* from John McTiernan's 1987 film moving through a De Stijl forest.



Self-portrait, 1960

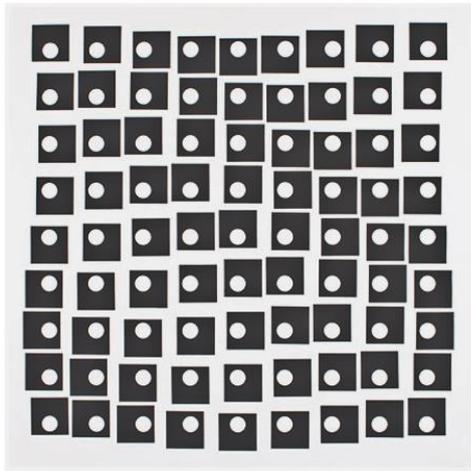
The influence of an all black and white exhibition by Vasarely, which Le Parc saw just before leaving Argentina, was key. But while Vasarely would say, as Le Parc puts it: 'I am an artist, it is not the system which determines these variations but my human intuition', for Le Parc the intention was rather to remove any trace of the human hand or artistic intuition. The formation of the grav in 1960 cemented Le Parc's anti-art position. Their first manifesto, 'Propositions sur le mouvement' (Proposals on Movement, 1961), declared their intention to 'remove the word art from our vocabulary, and all that it currently represents'. The notion of an artistic

'research group' was in the air at the time. A decade earlier, Pierre Schaeffer had formed the Groupe de recherche de musique concrète (GRMC) – later the Groupe de recherches musicales – for the exploration of *musique concrète*, and the two organizations crossed paths on more than one occasion. The filmmaking wing of the grmc made a documentary about the GRAV and, shortly afterwards, Schaeffer invited Le Parc and his colleagues to cooperate with him on a more experimental film project.

For Le Parc, a practice of *recherche* was the motor for the acceleration of his aesthetic evolution, recalling frenzied monotyping sessions that would produce two years' of work in a single summer. Many of his later works are preceded by miniature studies in gouache from years earlier – several of which, such as the 16 small images titled *Projet couleur* (Colour Project, 1959) were included in the exhibition – and Le Parc claims that above all it was his continuous 'attitude of experimentation and research' that he wished to put across in his retrospective at Palais de Tokyo. 'One might say', he tells me, 'that the different themes I have developed, the different arcs of my research, are always open, but they may give place to different prolongations, different transformations, different evolutions.'

Since the mid-1960s, Le Parc has been carefully cultivating a reputation as the great *emmerdeur* (or irritant) of the French art scene. Honoured in 1967 as a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, in 1968 he was expelled from France for his support of a Renault factory occupation – only

to be invited back by popular demand scant months later. In the 1970s, he was at the forefront of an artists' protest against the direction of the new national cultural centre (the Centre Pompidou), only to be further decorated in the early 1980s to become an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. This love-hate relationship with the establishment – and, indeed, his notorious scuttling of a major show at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1972 on the toss of a coin – may partly explain why it has been 40 years since his last exhibition in France.



*Rotation de carrés* (Rotation of Squares), 1959/91, acrylic on canvas, 1.5 x 1.5 m

By the mid-1960s, he tells me, he had arrived at the conclusion that ‘the world of contemporary art, for the most part, repeated the functioning of society at large’, that is, the maintaining of a passive populace. The intent, then, of his kinetic art became to shake the observer out of this passivity, indeed to render such a position almost physically impossible. You have to palpably fight your way through the hanging shards of mirrored plastic that make up *Passage cellule* (Cell Passage, 1963) – the only way in to the ‘Labyrinth’ (made collectively by the GRAV in the early 1960s) and now also to the Palais de Tokyo show. ‘I tried,’ he says, ‘to create a direct relationship with the eye of the spectator, by eliminating all intermediaries.’ You only need to regard yourself through the mirrored slats of his *Cloison à lames réfléchissantes* (Partition of Reflective Blades, 1966) to find your own reflection divided and multiplied in endlessly proliferating ways as you shift perspective relative to it. The work invites you to move through and about it, to experiment with your own relation to it.

Le Parc moved to a more overtly political direct action later in the decade, ultimately being arrested and deported on the way to the Renault occupation in the Parisian suburbs. For Frank Popper, who wrote extensively on Le Parc and kinetic art in the 1960s and '70s, the two were never easily separated to begin with. ‘We weren’t against the Centre Pompidou itself nor its architecture,’ Le Parc explains of the protest he became famously associated with. The campaign was simply hoping for ‘a more transparent relationship with the artists in Paris at the time’. It all started in 1975, while the museum was still under construction. ‘I read in the newspaper that the new director, Pontus Hultén, had invited the ten best galleries in Paris to visit the site. He explained the programme to them

and took them to lunch at the best restaurant in the district. Then I learnt that he had invited a further 40 galleries to visit in the afternoon for the same reason. So I said to some friends: next it will be our turn.' But the turn of Le Parc's friends – the artists and critics – never came, and this slight spurred a movement of some 300 disgruntled opponents. In retrospect, however, Hultén's choice seems like a kind of nodal point in the shift in power Le Parc identified to me earlier: away from the well-known critics who might make or break an artist, and towards museum directors, collectors and curators.



*Frappez les gradés* (Strike the Officers), 1971/2013, installation view  
at Palais de Tokyo. Photograph: André Morin

As Le Parc himself became more fractious, so too did his work. It was in this period, between his temporary 'banishment' in 1968 to the Pompidou affair in 1975, that he started erecting punching bags and shooting galleries of cops, judges and politicians. These game works testify as much to the artist's frustration, his visceral need to strike out at something, as his playfulness. Which is not to say that he ever really abandoned kineticism. He spent much of the 1980s and '90s working on large outdoor realizations of his contortions or anamorphoses, whether as murals or vast constructions in bent steel, in places as far-flung as Colombia, Ecuador, Italy, Spain and South Korea. He insisted to me that 'the same idea' ran through his entire practice. With several of his pieces also exhibited this year alongside younger artists at the Grand Palais's 'Dynamo' exhibition across town (in whose company his work seems remarkably fresh), it may be that this idea's time has come round again.

Three days after our interview, I caught Le Parc's eye at the opening of his exhibition at Palais de Tokyo. Hanging back, somewhat apart from the

large crowds swarming about the different halls, he left most of the talking to the show's curators. As we entered the last room, the Games Room, a group of eight women in Monty Python-esque fake beards grabbed the microphone from Palais president Jean de Loisy, in order to stage a protest at the lack of work by female artists on display in the centre's new season. Calling themselves *Les Amies de La Barbe* (Friends of the Beard), the protesters sarcastically congratulated the Palais for 'respecting the fundamental value: the masculine figure of the artist', noting that 93.5 percent of the work in the new thematic exhibitions and 100 percent in the monographic shows was by men. As the press officers and gallery assistants hurriedly tried to move the crowd along to the next exhibition, I spotted Le Parc standing to one side and applauding, a wry smile playing about his face. While some power structures may have shifted, others have evidently remained remarkably resilient.

1 All quotes taken from an interview with the artist on 22 February 2013 at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France.

*Julio Le Parc lives and works in Cachan, France. In recent years, he has participated in group shows at Lacma, Los Angeles, USA; the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C., USA; and the Centre Pompidou, Metz, France. In 2013, he was the subject of a major survey at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France, and his work will be shown in October at the Nara Roesler Gallery, São Paulo, and Casa Daros, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.*



**ROBERT BARRY**

Robert Barry is a freelance writer and composer from Brighton, England. His book *The Music of the Future* is published by Repeater.

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