

Elisa Carollo, "Philippe Parreno's Largest Exhibition in Japan is Worth the Trek'," *Observer*, July 24, 2024

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Philippe Parreno's Largest Exhibition in Japan Is Worth the Trek

The artist prompts a critical investigation of the complex interplay between technology, human experience, human cognition and the nature of reality itself.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 07/24/24 11:31am

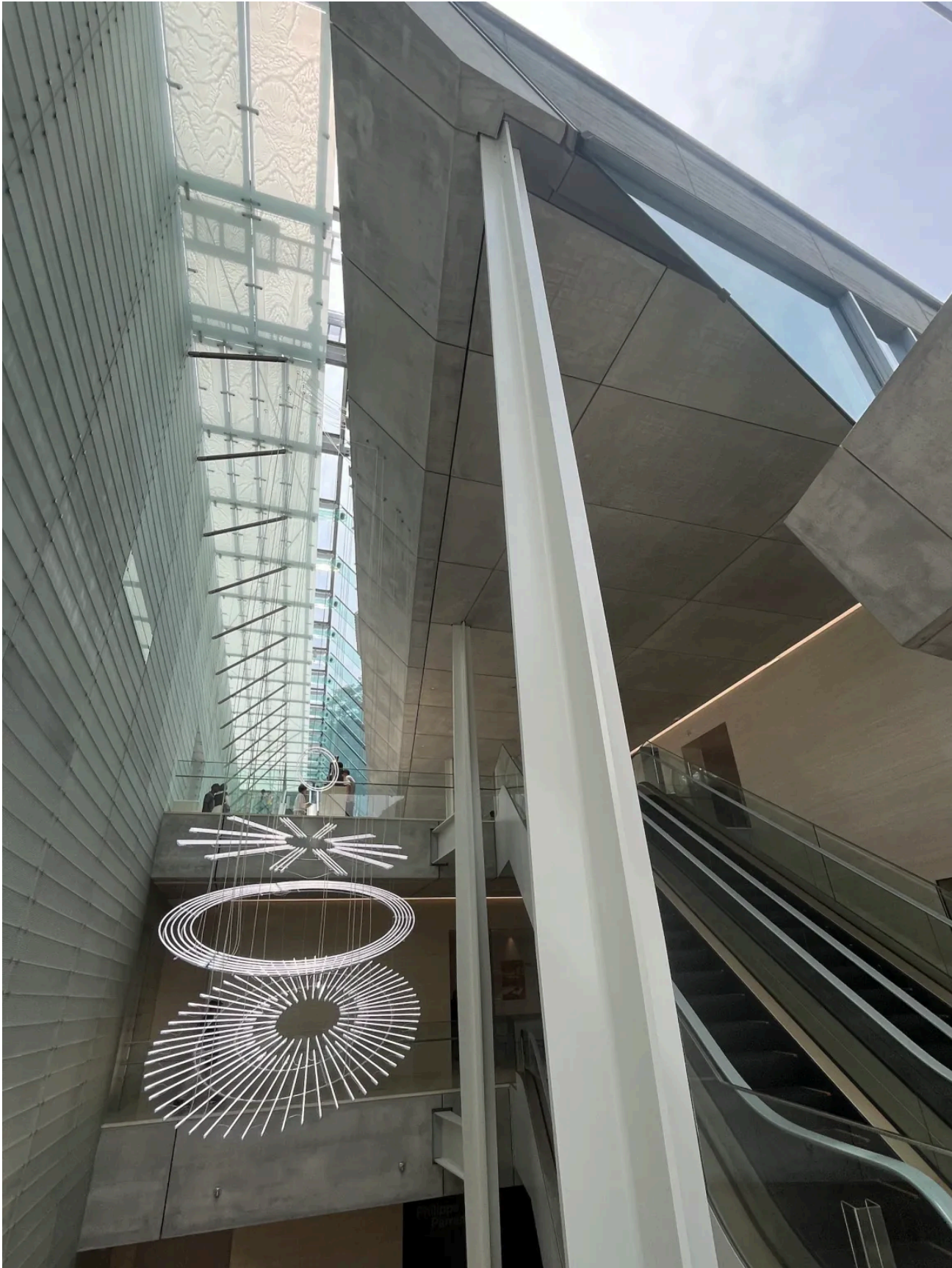


Designed by Japanese architects Nikken and nestled in the forest, Pola Museum of Art achieves a full symbiosis between Hakone's natural beauty and art. [Pola Museum of Art](#)

The Pola Museum of Art might not yet be as well-known an art destination in Japan as the [art islands Naoshima and Teshima](#) but nevertheless, this private museum up in the mountains—just a two-hour train ride from Tokyo—offers the perfect combination of art and nature. All it takes to get there is the Romancecar limited express train up to Hakone-Yumoto Station. From there, you'll transfer to a little old-style train that will take you on a 40-minute ride through rustically beautiful scenery, all the way up to the town of Hakone, where a shuttle (or the regular bus) can transport you to the museum. It's a bit of a hike, but I can assure you it's worth the trek.

Designed by Japanese architecture firm [Nikken Sekkei](#), the Pola Museum of Art's stunning glass and concrete architecture perfectly integrates with the surrounding landscape of Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park. A large installation by Welsh artist and sculptor Cerith Wyn Evans occupies the extensive transitional space between exterior and interior, where bronze sculptures

The museum's collection of approximately 10,000 items was assembled over some 40 years by the late Tsuneshi Suzuki, the second-generation head of the Pola Corporation, who established the museum and opened it to the public in 2002. The current show, "From Impressionism to Richter," pairs the work of German contemporary artists with Monet's *Nyphées* and *Moules*, as well as some of the finest works by Renoir, Cézanne and Picasso plus two enigmatic portraits by Amedeo Modigliani.



A view of the museum's striking architecture in conversation with Cerith Wyn Evans's neon sculpture. Photo by Elisa Carollo

In this unique setting, the museum is currently presenting the largest survey of Philippe Parreno's work in Japan in the thought-provoking exhibition, "Places and Spaces," making the trip even more of a must.

Since the '90s, the acclaimed French artist has been challenging and investigating cinema as a medium of narration, blurring the lines between fiction and reality, artificial and natural, and unveiling its mechanisms and dynamics. His works, as well as his exhibitions, often consist of an ever-changing open field, which exposes the viewer to different technological simulations aimed at suspending the sense and perception of reality.

At Pola Museum of Art, Parreno has created a large-scale theatrical set divided into distinctive chapters or rooms, where mysterious presences, voices, lights, darkness and hidden messages come together in a dramatic sequence. Transforming the museum space into a labyrinth of symbols, the exhibition immerses the visitor in experiences of both wonder and confusion, not knowing what will be next or if one is already involved as a performer.

The journey starts in one of his aquarium rooms, where the sense of reality and materiality is subverted by a series of mylar floating fish that make you feel like you are inside water. Slowly drifting, these colorful fishes evoke a sense of familiarity, a hint of melancholy and nostalgia for a childhood left behind. Notably, in this latest work from Parreno's fish balloon series, the artist meticulously crafted each of the fish eyes that convey irrepressible curiosity and joy, as they seem to be lost in contemplation in an imaginary ocean of the outdoor forest.



Philippe Parreno, *My Room Is Another Fish Bowl*. Photo by Elisa Carollo

In the next room, in his well-known installation *Marilyn* (2012), the actress's deep loneliness resonates in her voice (here is generated by an algorithm) and in her writing (here recreated by a robot). Meanwhile, the camera pans silently around her hotel suite at New York's opulent Waldorf Astoria Hotel, recording personal effects the diva left behind while trying to give her point of view. In this complex choreography and continuous interplay between fiction and reality, between artificial and automatic, the actress is continuously embodied and disembodied, resulting in what the artist has described as "a portrait of a ghost embodied in an image." Questioning the power of the camera's eye to shape our sense of reality while obscuring or emphasizing specific aspects in relation to what is shown or not shown, Parreno unveils the other side of the celebrity: there's insecurity, fragility and deep discomfort lurking under the glamor and perfection shown on the screen.

The artifice behind this complex installation, and also the genius of the artist's mind, is revealed downstairs in another room showcasing a series of rarely shown drawings created for three films: *Marilyn*, *C.H.Z.* and those currently in production (*100 Questions*, *50 Lies*) along with a standalone drawing series, *Lucioles*.

Presented inside vitrines, these images dramatically appear and disappear with the interplay of light and darkness as some sudden epiphanies emerge from the subconscious. Parreno's drawings are more like prophetic dreams. Made in preparation for the movies more than mental maps or storyboards, they appear as free annotations of symbols, situations and feelings. As precious witnesses to the inner workings of Parreno's creative process, these seemingly random constellations of images envision sporadic moments then coming together in the flow of the cinematic life.

The following room is occupied by orange and uncannily shaped balloons floating but also hanging as parasites. They're part of *Speech Bubbles*, a series that Philippe Parreno conceived around the end of the '90s as a mass of cartoonish 3D speech bubbles of different colors, trapped against and suspended in their noise, without a way to convey their messages. The first batch of *Speech Bubbles* was produced in 1997 for a labor union demonstration—participants were meant to write messages on them. Today, with their playful but somehow disturbing and invasive presence, they stand as a critique of the transient culture of online chatting and of the futility of a public debate becoming increasingly empty of solid arguments and positions, but they can also represent the suppressed, silent protestations of countless voiceless individuals

Parreno's *Balloons* are accompanied here by an article published in 1975 by Italian writer Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Disappearance of the Fireflies," in which he mourned the vanishing of fireflies due to rapidly worsening environmental pollution, drawing parallels to the decline in postwar Italy's culture and inner wealth as a result of insensible consumerism and authoritarianism. Inspired by this famous text and the powerful poetic metaphors made by the writer, in 1993, Parreno created an installation featuring electric lights that imitated fireflies: turned on only at night and so never encountered by visitors during museum hours, they powerfully evoked this idea of rebirth and loss, of renewal and the fragility of the flame of hope, to stay alive also in dark and discouraging geopolitical times.



Philippe Parreno, *Speech Bubbles (Transparent Orange)*. Photo by Elisa Carollo

This experience of suspension between light and darkness, hope and despair, deception and simulation, continues in the next room, where a haunting robotic creature made of light bulbs stands, illuminating only intermittently. As an epiphanic presence emerging from the black void, it could be an angel from the hyper-technological age or a mermaid trapped in the relics of the electronic industry. A bench in the darkness invites you to sit in front of an LCD display that intricately replicates a future landscape imagined by generative A.I., the direction of light changing in alignment with the real-time position of the sun. On the other side, another luminous machine connected to numerous cables blinks in an organic yet irregular rhythm, as an alien creature that has been captured and imprisoned into a machine to study it.

All these tech-animated creatures in the room appear to have lives of their own, out of any functionality humans could have created them for. Still, everything in this sci-fi or post-human imaginative-yet-real space is carefully choreographed and manipulated by Parreno to deliver an uncannily nonsensical yet cohesive organic experience as if everything was in a code, in a language and rationale that goes beyond human comprehension.

Oscillating between chaos and order, between playful and unsettling and disorientating experiences, Parreno suspends any ordinary sense of reality, triggering a more conscious interrogation of what reality is once this is constantly integrated, shaped and manipulated by new everyday technologies, even beyond cinematic fiction.

In a moment when A.I. is supposed to “Ignite the Consciousness Revolution,” Philippe Parreno once again created an open field for a critical investigation of the complex interplay between technology, human experience, human cognition and the nature of reality itself. Repeatedly forcing the visitor into a series of experiences where boundaries between the virtual and physical world continuously blur, the artist proves to us how differentiating between “real” and “authentic” becomes more challenging if we don’t start to question what we perceive and what produced the data and input we absorbed.

Welcome to Reality Park echos eerily in the darkness of the last room, inviting us into an ambiguous unreality or possibly a portal to another reality. Parreno’s work appears as a “reality check,” unraveling the various potential levels of reality, many of which already seem to escape common understanding due to the intricate interplay between digital manipulation, A.I. and emerging technologies that have already infiltrated our daily lives.

As one exits Pola Museum of Art, out of this technological hyper-exposure, a nature trail leads one into the woods, where stunning works of contemporary art and sound art coexist with the very real landscape. In the forest’s silence, you can contemplate the gentle ripples in the water caused by the wind on Roni Horn’s cast glass *Air Burial*, listen to a music piece echoing softly across the trees and concentrate on your breath as you walk through the world and its beauty. Here, in this serene setting, perhaps, there’s still a chance to achieve a moment of higher consciousness out of our primordial human perception of the reality surrounding us.



Roni Horn, *Air Burial* (Hakone, Japan), 2017-2018; Cast glass. Photo: Koroda Takeru © Roni Horn