

# Testi brevi di accompagnamento

Linguistica, semiotica, traduzione

a cura di

**Donella Antelmi**

**Mara Logaldo**



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DONELLA ANTELMI

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## When Captions Need Captions: Notes on Philippe Parreno's *Labels* and *Marquees*

Vincenzo Di Rosa – Università IULM, Milano

Captions are considered one of the most important elements of an exhibition and therefore an interesting topic for researchers of exhibition and curatorial studies. However, until the 1990s captions were taken into consideration – especially by curators – almost exclusively for their role in giving information about artworks, as well as for interpreting and structuring the exhibition routes. By contrast, in the last decade of the twentieth century there was a “curatorial turn” (O’Neill, 2012) which elicited a progressive overlap between artistic practices and curatorial strategies. Since then, artists have begun to reflect on captions both as autonomous objects and as artworks in their own right. In their seminal work *Art Since 1900*, Bois *et al.* (2004: 628) overtly acknowledge this ambiguity between making and curating art: “[...] the nineties witnessed the rise not only of the artist-as-curator but of the complementary figure of the curator-as-artist [...] This development of curating as a pervasive medium of contemporary art suggests an uncertainty about the domains of artmaking and curating alike”.

In this paper I would like to analyze some artistic experiments with captions performed by the French artist Philippe Parreno, with particular reference to his exhibition *Anywhere, Anywhere, Out of the World* and to his *Marquee* series. Parreno’s meditation on captions actually began in 1994 when, in an article published in the journal «Document sur l’art» and titled *Facteur temps*, he wondered about the time of reception of the artwork and the control that the artist should have on this process. Moreover, in a later text, he would declare: “Museum signage often tell us where to look, and why artworks are important; but by avoiding the use of

this kind of instructive and didactic text, people are more entitled to create the artwork for themselves” (Parreno, 2014a).

In *Anywhere, Anywhere, Out of the World* (Paris, Palais de Tokyo, 2013), Parreno used the whole exhibition as a medium, assigning a central role to captions, which were part of a complex narrative structure. For the large scale of Palais de Tokyo, the artist realized *Flickering Labels* (2013). It consisted of captions composed of small Kindle screens that were set on the walls and turned on and off intermittently according to the sound of *Petrushka* by Igor Stravinskij, spread out throughout the exhibition space by four Disklavier pianos. Besides information about the artworks on show, *Flickering Labels* displayed on the screens passages from the artist’s 1995 book *Snow Dancing*. By following the arrangement of the captions into space it was possible to follow the story told in the book<sup>53</sup>.

Parreno focused on the ambiguous nature of the caption between text and image also in the exhibition *The Ultrasonic Scream of the Squirrel* – held at the Air de Paris Gallery in 2007. In that exhibition Parreno presented two flashing labels subjected to different light rhythms: the former consisted of an image of the performance in which the artist, together with the ventriloquist Ronn Lucas, read his text *Underground man*; the latter presented the same text that Parreno and Lucas were reading in the photograph.

The *Marquee* series is profoundly marked by similar considerations. In fact, they are luminous sculptures – made of plexiglass, lights and sounds – inspired by the luminous signs placed outside the cinemas of Broadway in the 50s to promote films. As the artist states, “the *Marquee* is a big label in 3-D that takes the place of an object that was supposed to be labelled. It’s a body snatcher; the marquee replaces the object, and that is the event! Usually movie marquees tell you what movies or plays are on,

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53. It was during the exhibition *Alien Seasons* at Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2002 that Parreno exhibited for the first time the flashing captions.



but here you end up with a thing that doesn't provide that kind of information. You are attracted to it anyway because it's big and lit up" (Parreno, 2014b: 37).

A similar installation, although not part of the *Marquee* series, was created by the artist in 1994 for an exhibition in collaboration with Carsten Höller held at the Air de Paris Gallery. In that case, however, there was a textual element which referred to the title of the exhibition: "Mais ce que vous avez contre moi c'est que j'ai abandonné mon premier amour". The artist produced the first *Marquee* in 2006 for the exhibition *Interior Cartoons* at the Esther Schipper Gallery in Berlin. On that occasion, the installation surmounted the entrance of the gallery and was presented with a neon on the front side of the *Marquee* which replicated the perimeter of the gallery. Indeed, *Interior Cartoons* was conceived as an exhibition of the exhibition space, and the *Marquee* in this case announced, with the neon sign, the structure of the space as well as its emptiness.

The difference between Parreno's first experiment in 1994 and the *Marquees* realized after 2006 is that the latter present no textual elements or iconic signs that refer to something outside themselves: the *Marquee* is a self-referential sign, although it is at the same time deeply dependent on the context of exposure. As a matter of fact, this interrelatedness was underscored in the exhibition at Palais de Tokyo, where the artist juxtaposed for the first time seventeen *Marquees*, presenting them together as a new artwork entitled *Danny the street* and inviting visitors to pass through the installation.

The analysis of Parreno's artistic production reveals a progressive subtraction of textual and iconic element linked to the *Marquee* and a consequent tautological dimension of his work. With the *Marquees*, Parreno deconstructed the system of signs on which the artworld is based, evoking its irresistible power of attraction and questioning the control by museums upon the reception of

works of art. Through this practice, Parreno has ultimately reconsidered the concept of caption, conceiving it not as a support for the interpretation or identification of the artwork but as a work of art itself. In doing so, he also suggests a complex question: when captions become artworks, do they need other captions?

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