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Julio Le Parc, Serpentine Gallery, London — interview

Edwin Heathcote [Author alerts](#)

The Argentinian-born, Paris-based artist talks about his playful, provocative work



Julio Le Parc's 'Unstable Floor with Pulsating Light' (1964)

Op Art, Pop Art. Concrete Art, Kinetic Art. Activist Art, Spatial Art. Installation Art, Light Art. Julio Le Parc has had a hand in the development of every one of them. The Argentinian-born, Paris-based artist's career spans the postwar explosion in Latin American art, the *événements* in Paris in 1968 and the radical questioning of the roles of both gallery and artist that followed. But if that all sounds a little like artspeak for “serious”, don't be fooled. His current exhibition at the Serpentine in London demonstrates that art can be immensely enjoyable without resorting to irony, to ugliness or to keeping its tongue in its cheek. In fact it sticks its tongue right out in a joyful raspberry.

There is no art gallery preciousness here. You can whack an orange punchball, make ping-pong

balls vibrate, bounce springs and pluck strings with balls on. There are swinging reflective strips of foil you can walk through and light installations sending reflections twinkling across the ceilings. There's a target featuring archetypes you can chuck a ball at. And in that target, the cartoon capitalists, imperialists, bureaucrats and policemen reveal both Le Parc's skill at caricature and also the anti-establishment streak that saw the artist briefly exiled from France for his activism in the wake of the '68 protests.

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Julio Le Parc

When I meet Le Parc, he is up a ladder supervising the installation of a reflective, kinetic piece in the Serpentine's Sackler Gallery. He is 86, and sensibly takes a little while climbing down again, but, in his blue cravat and Breton cap, he still cuts a tall and impressively bohemian figure. I tell him the exhibition makes me smile, which not many art shows do. "It is a game," he responds. "The humour is important to break with the position of authority." There is still a twinkle of the ambitions of '68 in his eyes as he says it.

"In the age when I studied," he continues, referring to his time in Buenos Aires and, from the 1950s, Paris, "the spectator was expected to know too much and it created distance — the engagement was missing. We need intellectual engagement, of course, but it also needs to be sensory."

Le Parc comes from an era of probing, radical artists — an era which, despite the directness and freshness of his work, now seems very distant. Taught by Lucio Fontana, he was instrumental in establishing the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV, a play on the French word for "serious"), a radical collective that sought to break down barriers between artists and the public through a series of participatory installations called Labyrinths.

One famous episode in his life saw Le Parc offered a big retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1972; his response was to flip a coin to decide whether to accept — the show lost and it never happened. "The context of art has changed," he tells me. "Art used to have to fulfil a different role. Now its value is seen in terms of the market. We should be considering other forms of value."

When I ask what those other forms might be, he answers: "Mystification." I ask him to clarify. "Disorientation," he says, "about ways of walking, of getting lost, about other ways of moving through space. An exhibition is about getting people together yet each having a different experience of the work at the same time.

"All you need to understand this exhibition is three things," he says. "That it is about games, light

and *dessins*. “Drawings?” I ask. “No, not drawings,” he says. “Doodles. I call them telephone drawings, things you scribble while on the phone.” So finally we look through a stack of framed doodles, which exude a very 1960s sense of a world in the midst of joyful transformation and perfectly complement the ludic op-pop of the rest of the show.

Le Parc’s career spans a huge arc in modern art. He has spent a career making works that are accessible, provocative and fun. The only proper response is to go and enjoy them. And take the kids.

Until February 15, serpentinegalleries.org

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