STEPHEN PRINA: MUTATING MODERNISM

TEXT / NUIJ BANAI

It's almost too uncanny that artist and musician Stephen Prina, tenured at Harvard University's Department of Visual and Environmental Studies since 2004, teaches at the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts. Constructed in 1963, Le Corbusier's only building in North America is a strange pastiche of designs and devices used in many of his earlier works. In a self-reflexive gesture, the iconic modernist master created the Carpenter Center using discrete elements from previous masterpieces such as the Villa Savoye, 1929, L'Unité d'habitation, 1946-1952, Chandigarh, 1950-1953, and La Tourette, 1956-1960. Consciously or not, Le Corbusier bestowed a parting gift to future cultural producers who would inevitably have to engage with modernism as both a significant legacy and an enormous burden. With remarkable prescience, he conceived of this building as both metaphor and manifesto for a modernism that contained the potential for sampling, rearrangement, and renewal despite its emergence as a set of historically constituted terms.

Born in 1954 in the prairie town of Galesburg, Illinois, Prina has spent more than twenty years absorbing Le Corbusier's lesson and teasing out its various, often-conflicting possibilities. As befits a project that confronts modernism's multiple meanings, it is difficult to point to the exact origins of Prina's investigation. Perhaps they can be traced to his MFA days at the California Institute of the Arts, in the late 1970s, where he studied with Douglas Huebler, John Baldessari, and Michael Asher. Prina clearly internalized the principles and working methods of this first generation of conceptual artists who undermined the modernist tenets of aesthetic autonomy through photography, language, video, and site-specific work. Nowhere is this more evident than in Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet, 1988—ongoing, a deconstructed representation of the 556 catalogue paintings of Édouard Manet. The series is comprised of abstract, wash paintings that replicate the exact size and shape of Manet's originals but bear no iconographic resemblance to them. Each of these paintings is accompanied by a grid-like print, displayed immediately to its right, which functions like a cryptic legend for the whole oeuvre.

While formally spare, Exquisite Corpse is indicative of Prina's dense, conceptually driven approach to art historical precedents. Just as Manet constituted his singular style by pillaging from a variety of sources, including the Classical, Spanish, and Netherlandish traditions, his own paintings have become a fertile reservoir for prospective generations of marauders. Yet, while Manet looked to his forebears for stylistic inspiration, Prina conceives of Manet and, by extension, modernism as a conceptual template that makes possible endless permutations, which are not necessarily based on visual likeness. In other words, Prina approaches modernism as a self-generating system that creates the conditions of possibility for his contemporary practice rather than as a stable, monolithic whole or a historically completed project. The title of the series, which cites the collaborative surrealist game of Exquisite Corpse,
adds to this linearity-defying temporality. In the same way that the surrealist picture was created by the contribution of different participants, each of whom renounced definitive authorship, Prina suggests that all contemporary practice is, in fact, a case of ongoing dialogue between artists of different eras who, like mediums, channel the diverse systems that constitute modernism in their work.

Yet Prina is not content with performing these conceptual moves as if on a self-enclosed chessboard. In a 2004 interview, he explains, "...Manet's work takes as a point of departure that it is always already inscribed in the museum, that its placement within it is preordained..." This contingency is the basis for much of Prina's work, including the remarkable Galerie Max Hetzler, 1991, a site-specific installation originally made for the Cologne gallery, which has enjoyed subsequent incarnations in New York, Santa Barbara, and Rotterdam. The piece, adapted to the particular dimensions of each site, comprises photographs, wall labels, and architectural models of exhibitions held at the Max Hetzler gallery between 1974 and 1991 and a floor-to-ceiling sign that reads, "We represent ourselves to the world." By transforming the gallery's archive of its exhibition history into an exhibition that is, in effect, a discrete artwork, Prina turns the tables on the normative order of business. Yet, this is not a subversive gesture, by any means. Rather, he underscores the fact that the mechanisms of commercial viability—namely the production of documentation as a means of self-promotion—are an integral dimension of the art object's very existence. In other words, if the legacy of Manet is taken to its logical conclusion, then the art object's preordained inscription into an institutional setting necessitates a well-oiled system of public validation. Why forcefully isolate these mutually constitutive elements when they are each other's bread and butter?

The imperative of presenting the art object in a social context ("We represent ourselves to the world") as an intrinsic part of its intelligibility is a central element of Prina's most recent series, The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You, a version of which was included in the Whitney Biennial 2008. Bearing a different subtitle and color scheme and adjusted to the host institution's specific dimensions, the work is a portable text-sound-image installation that has already been realized at Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York, 2006, Galerie Gisela Capitain in Cologne, 2007, and Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, 2008, and, as Prina stated in a recent interview, will make its final public appearance at the Yokohama Triennale in Japan this fall. Described as a "mini-Broadway-musical-on-the-road," each room-size installation-cum-lounge consists of a color coordinated wall-to-wall carpet, shipping crates transformed into pillowed benches, a small light display box showing a single image, and loudspeakers that broadcast pop songs, performed by Prina, whose lyrics are culled from various sources—the writings of art historians, artists, journalists, philosophers, economists, and so on.

While meeting the criteria of the decade-old Relational Aesthetics trend, which invites the public to create new social formations within the context of the art institution, this project is also a significant continuation of such mid-twentieth century artworks as Marcel Duchamp's Boîte-en-Valse, 1935-1940. Like Duchamp's portable suitcase, which contained miniature reproductions of his earlier works, Prina reveals the basic condition of exile that was always constitutive of the modernist art object and that continues to stimulate contemporary art production. Because an artwork does not exist without social visibility, it is fated to perpetually wander the globe in search of its next public venue. Like migratory communities such as the circus or the solitary transience of the traveling salesman, the artwork is expected to simultaneously entertain, edify, and market itself in order to survive. Along with market-driven exchange value, the public is one of the crucial arbiters of the art object's life expectancy and Prina caters to this fickle jury in every feasible way. His installations pull out all the stops, including physical comfort fused with crisp design, visual and aural enjoyment, and continuous reinvention for novel situations. To keep the public on their toes, Prina
has cleverly adapted the installation’s model of seriality to various exhibition genres such as the one-person gallery show, biennial, triennial, and mid-career retrospective and made sure to select tempting global venues in North America, Europe, and Asia. Echoing Duchamp’s suitcase, which was initially made in an edition of twenty and consequently augmented in the 1950s and 1960s, Prina has also shrewdly programmed obsolescence into The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You. Without sounding cynical, this assimilation of the laws of supply and demand will most probably increase the project’s notoriety and value.

More than half a century after its official demise, the shadow of modernism still looms large over contemporary art. Yet Prina’s temporally and discursively layered work, with its elliptical detours and ironic smirks, doesn’t simply refer to a lost stylistic and social ideology. What his practice helps us understand, in fact, is that modernism didn’t just come to a conclusive halt, an epistemic rupture followed by the emergence of a newfangled phenomenon called “contemporary art.” Rather, he suggests that, parallel to changing historical conditions, modernism virally mutated to produce the conceptual, structural, and formal maneuvers of art today.

NOTES
2. Author’s interview with Stephen Prina, Boston, May 2, 2008.

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